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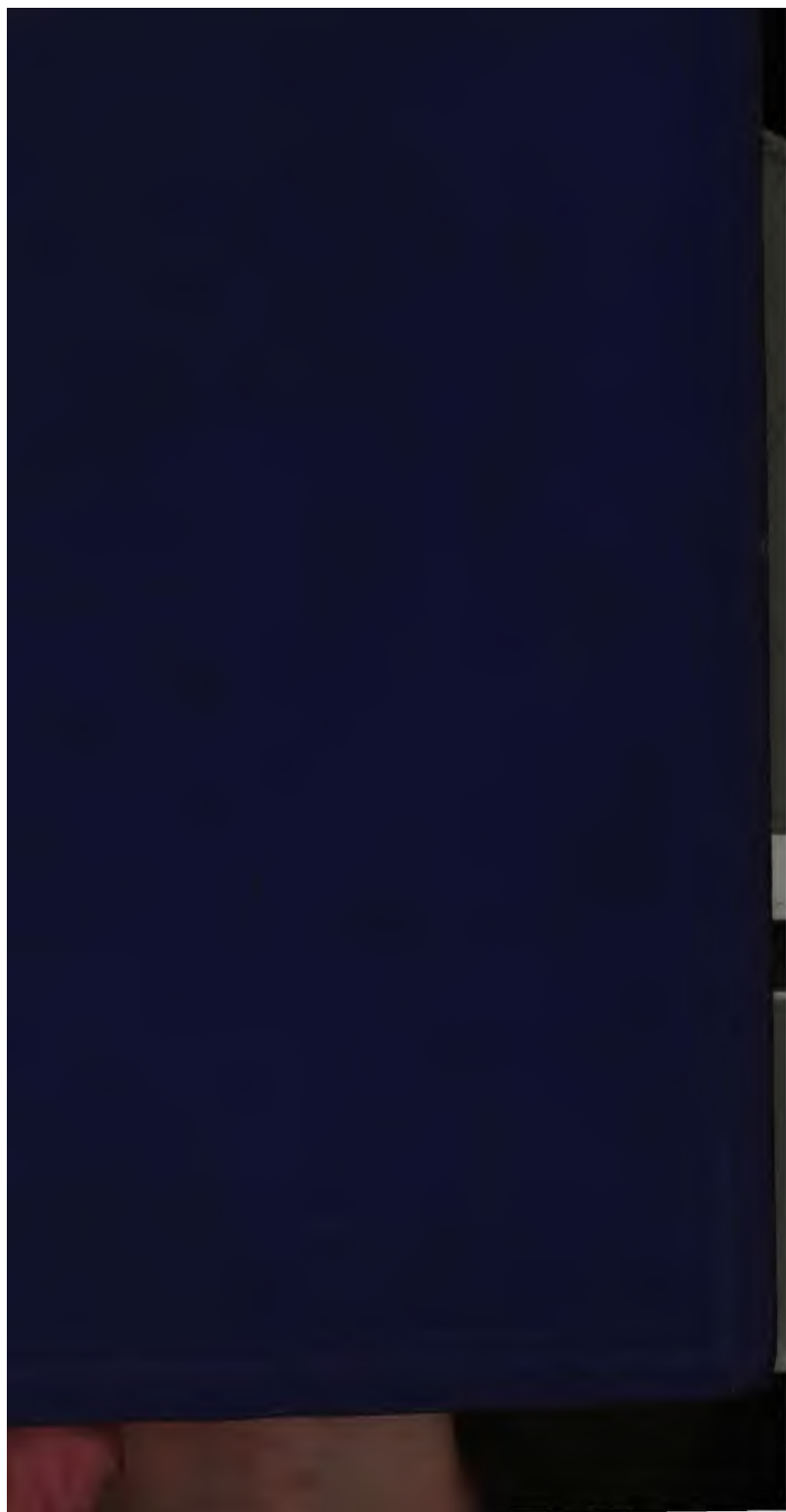
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RUTH MAXWELL.

VOL. II.



RUTH MAXWELL.

BY

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AUTHOR OF

“CLAUDE,” “HELEN’S FIRST LOVE,”

&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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RUTH MAXWELL.

CHAPTER I.

RUTH went to her aunt's party on the Tuesday. Mrs. Maxwell insisted too urgently to be resisted. Her slight paroxysm of jealousy soon subsided, and she was quite eager that her step-daughter should embrace every opportunity of improving her acquaintance with the Beaumonts. It became a new interest, and the great excitement of her life, to hear of her children through that channel. Little did poor Ruth think how greedily her mother (as she called her) devoured every scrap of information

she brought her of those fondly loved though unknown ones. In her perfect simplicity she believed the interest she observed in her step-mother arose entirely on her own account, and felt a most grateful sense of it, as well as satisfaction, that her step-mother could concern herself in anything outside her own home. It is strange how soon the mind reconciles itself to any new state of affairs when it has once determined that it is the inevitable, and it was with this conviction that Mrs. Maxwell, in her unfortunate anomalous position in regard to her children, became accustomed to the idea of seeing and hearing of them entirely through the eyes and ears of another. There were many opportunities given, after the acquaintance had fairly begun. It might easily have been extended to herself, but from that contingency Mrs. Maxwell

shrank with instinctive delicacy. She would only be personally known to her children as their mother, and be received by them as such. They must seek her openly, if ever she were to be acknowledged by them ; for she would not, under any other pretence, impose her society and her love upon them. It was but too fresh in her remembrance the day when she received the last letter from her boy, in which he refused to acknowledge the wife of Mr. Maxwell as his mother. It was that fatal recollection which always sternly interposed when she would have recalled herself to her children's memory, and claimed some return to her own undying affection for them. But she would not, she could not, bring herself to be open on the subject with Ruth.

She could not endure to crush this opening of an acquaintance brought about by no

seeking of her own, but, as she was fond of considering it, an almost providential event, which at once placed her husband's daughter on terms of peculiar regard and intimacy with the somewhat exclusive members of the Beaumont family. They had sought Ruth's acquaintance, and they should see and know her as she was, and without any of the prejudice which might have arisen against her, had they been aware that she was "the doctor's daughter." There was still a little ray of hope (that last remnant of Pandora's box) even in Mrs. Maxwell's crushed heart, and in spite of all her sorrowful experience of life, it could not be entirely extinguished, and served, with its faint glimmering light, to cheer the darkness that hid her children from her sight. Often would the unexpressed thought arise in her mind, "If they learn to appreciate and to

love Ruth, will they not forgive their mother for having loved her father? and will not that father become tolerated, if not dear, for her sake !”

Yes. Mrs. Maxwell was very humble in her aspirations. When the heart craves so urgently for the affection that is its due, it does not seek to dispute the terms on which it is to be accorded. But of a deeper tenderer attachment arising between her son and the “doctor’s daughter” Mrs. Maxwell did not at that time concern herself to speculate, for she thought as much of Maude’s regard for Ruth as she did of Louis’s appreciation of her charming step-daughter.

Thus it was that whilst encouraging and interesting herself in Ruth’s increasing intimacy with the Beaumonts, she steadily declined all participation on her own account. She said but little on the subject, but Ruth

saw it would only pain her step-mother to urge it ; so she contented herself with telling her new friends that her mother went nowhere—had never entered society since her many bereavements, and that the best chance of restoring her saddened spirits and impaired health would be to leave her to the undisturbed mode of life which seemed the most congenial to her inclination ; adding her hope that “Time,” the great restorer, might bring some change which would dispose her mother to more friendly relations with her immediate neighbours.

Then began to Ruth Maxwell a new and strange experience of life—that time of bewildering happiness which occurs but once in most women’s lives. Ruth was five-and-twenty, and had never known a love deeper than that of near and dear kindred. Neither did she recognize the beginning of that senti-

ment, in the new and bright light which suddenly appeared reflected on every daily detail of her uneventful existence. If she chanced to meet her new friends (and it was strange how often that chance occurred) the rest of the day became all radiant with the brightness caused by that meeting. If rare flowers and hot-house fruits came, as they so often did from Harewood Park, how the evidence of kindly remembrance seemed even sweeter than the gifts themselves! And how great was Ruth's happiness in observing the satisfaction that her step-mother quietly showed on the arrival of these tokens of regard! She therefore placed the chief part of her own conscious gratification to Mrs. Maxwell's account, believing her own pleasure arose from witnessing her step-mother's. Nor did the hitherto quiet, calm Ruth Maxwell ask herself why her heart's pulses

quicken'd so strangely when she went to visit her aunt at The Bower, and found that another visitor had already arrived, or might be expected there.

Neither, on his part, did Louis Beaumont care to analyze the new attraction that drew him so often in the same direction, and that caused him also to linger in the streets of that dull town of Castleford ; and made him find that he suddenly began to consider that it was the most direct road to every place, in whatever direction it might lie.

Then, as the Autumn drew near its close, and the hunting-season set in, he managed, somehow, to find himself, at the close of every day's sport, returning leisurely through Castleford ; and how constantly did he find he had business to transact, in the shape of commissions at various shops, either for himself or sister, and there loiter about, till a certain graceful figure was seen coming down

an adjoining street, and he hastened to meet Ruth Maxwell, and hold a few minutes' delicious parley with her, which they both, perhaps, prized the more highly because their ways and means of meeting and enjoying each other's society were so limited.

Ruth had declined visiting at Harewood Park. There was a something indefinable in Mrs. Maxwell's countenance and manner, when she once mooted the subject of an invitation, sent by Miss Beaumont, to go and stay a few days. Ruth, ever quietly observant of her mother's feelings, but always unsuspecting, still saw that the idea of her going there had called up some very exciting, perhaps painful recollections, though what their object or nature might be she could not most distantly conceive. However, it was enough for her. The invitation was declined, and in terms that caused it not to be repeated.

Mrs. Maxwell was hardly aware that Ruth had refused to visit her friends on her account, and often wondered, though she said nothing, that Ruth said no more about the Beaumonts wishing to see her at their own home. After the first mention of the possibility of her going there, which had so strangely moved her, she began to wish that Ruth might go there, and that, through her, she might see and hear of them in the daily routine of their domestic life; but that wish was not to be gratified as yet.

It was at The Bower that the intimacy grew and ripened between Ruth Maxwell and Louis Beaumont; and it may be said, also, that it met with a certain degree of encouragement from the Judge's widow. She sat by and watched the pair, and thence she drew her own inferences. She was good-naturedly pleased to see that her niece,

whom she cordially liked and admired, had the prospect of making (as she believed) so brilliant a marriage. It was also matter of secret triumph to the good lady that the child of her brother-in-law (whose connection had been so contemned) should, in her turn, be solicited to enter the family that had refused to acknowledge himself. She thought it was no business of hers to rip up family grievances, and proclaim all she herself knew of the antecedents of the two families. She might be allowed to suppose that Mr. Beaumont might be cognizant of the family relations as well as herself; but as the subject had never been alluded to by him, it was not for her to introduce it. Her niece came to see her at her own house, and if Mr. Beaumont chose to follow her there, or to visit her from time to time, in the hope of seeing her, she was not called upon to

interfere. She believed Ruth Maxwell to be quite worthy of becoming the mistress even of Harewood Park.

So the rotund little widow smiled more blandly than ever upon the young man, who, she felt persuaded, was destined to become her nephew ; and unwittingly indulged in a little spice of good-natured malice at the thought of Louis Beaumont's evident admiration of the "doctor's daughter." It never occurred to her that such a revelation might have placed all the parties on a very different footing.

There was one silent observer at The Bower, who took note of all that was passing, but for some time kept her opinions to herself, and that was the lady's companion, Miss Wheeler.

It happened, one bleak November day, that Ruth had paid an early visit to her

aunt, being, she said, in that neighbourhood, making some visits among the poor people. She was then detained at The Bower, for the day had turned out wet and stormy, and Lady Cunliffe insisted on her niece's remaining till it cleared up, as she was certain it would do later in the afternoon. Ruth was not very loath to be so prevailed upon. She took off her hat and heavy cloak, and settled herself in a favourite nook near the blazing fire. She felt and looked very bright and happy in that cheerful room. Then, as the day wore on, she was conscious of a slight tremor and flutter as she caught herself listening for the deep sound of the door-bell, which might announce the advent of a visitor—not an unusual event.

Miss Wheeler furtively watched Ruth, glancing from time to time from under her long eyelashes and heavy, sleepy-looking

lids. Ruth was laughing and talking a little nervously, it must be confessed, to her aunt, who responded merrily to all Ruth's pleasant little observations, not noticing any chance incoherences in her statements, which were two or three times quietly corrected by the calm, collected companion, who, on her part, offered few remarks besides.

At last came the long-expected peal at the bell, which, owing to the nearness of the back premises of The Bower, was distinctly audible in the drawing-room. Ruth could not repress a little start, and a sudden stop in the midst of her discourse ensued; whilst Miss Wheeler gave utterance to the ghost of a laugh, rather scornful than mirthful; and Lady Cunliffe's smiling countenance was turned in pleasant anticipation towards the door as her companion muttered, glancing at Ruth, "C'est lui;" but

Ruth affected not to hear; or, perhaps, failed to do so, as the butler threw open the door with the oft-repeated announcement of "Mr. Beaumont!"

The visitor entered with the easy air of one who, from long experience, has known himself welcome at all times, and in most houses. That of the Indian widow was no exception, especially on the present occasion; and she greeted him warmly, holding out both hands with a few cheery words of welcome, to which he answered,

"I was half afraid of coming in, Lady Cunliffe, in my forlorn plight, for I have been riding in the rain all day, and now my horse has cast a shoe; so whilst that misfortune is repairing, I thought I would just walk up the hill (you know it is all on my way home) and inquire after you."

"Oh! I don't want any inquiries, thank

you, Mr. Beaumont. I am generally pretty well ; and always glad to see you without standing on any ceremony."

"I know you are not a ceremonious person, Lady Cunliffe, or I might not have ventured to make my appearance just now."

"You are quite right, my dear sir. I hated ceremony when I was young, and I can't begin to practise it in my old age ; and, now you are come, won't you send for some dry things, and stay and dine, after your long day's ride?"

"I should like it, of all things," began Mr. Beaumont, glancing to the shady corner where Ruth sat playing with a fire-screen. Lady Cunliffe followed the direction of the young man's eyes, with her little quick round black ones, and addressing her niece, said,

"And you, too, Ruth ; we must have you

to make a fourth. I will send my man round by Mrs. Maxwell's to let her know you are here, and that I will send you home in the carriage in the evening. Come, that will be very pleasant. I am sure I am much obliged to the rain. So all that's settled, I hope."

Mr. Beaumont evidently waited for Ruth's reply before he spoke for himself, and it was soon given, though with a slight faltering that was not often detected in Miss Maxwell's speech.

"Indeed, no, thank you, dear aunt. You are very kind, but it is impossible. I ought to have been home long ago, and only waited on account of the rain. My mother will expect me, now it is clearing up, and I must go home. It is almost her dinner-time."

"Well, surely, for once, Mrs. Maxwell can dine alone," said the widow.

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"Not if I can help it," answered Ruth, in a low voice ; adding—"I know so well if I am not at home she would not dine at all. So indeed I would rather go. I have had a nice long afternoon with you, aunt."

"Well, my dear child, I never like to press people to do what they don't fancy ; so we will say no more about *you*. But what may we hope from *you*, Mr. Beaumont?"

"I fear I must give the same answer, Lady Cunliffe. I am expected at home, and they will wait dinner for me, though I do not pretend to declare that they will positively go fasting on my account, yet——"

"Yet," put in the hitherto silent companion, with a deprecating smile—"oh ! we can quite understand *you* do not like to disappoint your sister—or—or *Miss Powys* !"

CHAPTER II.

THERE was a moment's silence in the room after that little bomb had fallen—it caused no explosion, but lay calmly doing its small work of destruction. Miss Wheeler looked unconscious that she had said anything but what was most neat and appropriate to the subject, and Lady Cunliffe apparently treated her companion's amendment as though it had emanated from her visitor, for, after a minute's pause, she said,


“Well, I can only say I am sorry for it. I don't want to cause disappointment to any-

body, and can only hope I may be more lucky another time."

"I can assure you, Lady Cunliffe, the disappointment is mine!" Here Mr. Beaumont glanced across at Ruth, who was busy tying on her hat, and arranging her shawl. "But, as you say, I shall hope for better luck another time."

Ruth felt the appealing look in her direction, and lifted her shy eyes towards the speaker, but quickly dropped them as they met his. She had felt and understood the meaning of Miss Wheeler's remark. It was hardly possible that anyone living in the near neighbourhood of Harewood Park could remain ignorant of the report which gave the master of the place to his young, beautiful, heiress cousin.

Still on all sides it was conjecture alone. No one knew positively that there was any



real engagement between them. And Ruth was inclined to disbelieve the report. She could not imagine that Louis Beaumont was an engaged man—he neither spoke nor looked like one. And Ruth was very trusting in those she cared for. She never argued the point with herself—that would have been to bring it too home, but her actual persuasion was that Mr. Beaumont was as free to form any attachment he might please as she might be herself. Still the companion's inuendo fell with an uncomfortable weight upon her heart. She longed to get into the open air and walk off the sense of oppression caused by it. So she rose, and putting on her walking things, came up to her aunt and wished her good-bye. Lady Cunliffe kissed Ruth and said,

“I know you won't wait for the carriage, so there is no use in talking of ordering it

now ; but I would have done it half an hour ago, if I had thought of it."

Ruth smiled and said,

" You know I have never been used to a carriage, and I consider my pony-chair a great luxury ; but I can assure you I had much rather walk home this afternoon, as I have often done before."

Then Ruth said good-bye to the two ladies and the one gentleman present. Louis Beaumont, as he held her hand with a gentle pressure, was on the point of saying,

" Cannot I see you home?"

And then he caught the eyes of Miss Wheeler so eagerly fixed upon him that he relinquished his intention, and contented himself with a brief good-bye also ; and then, as Ruth left the room, he sat down again to say a few words more to Lady Cunliffe and her companion, and after a brief chat took his departure also.

The door had hardly closed upon him before Lady Cunliffe turned round and said, with more animation than was usual,

“What made you make that remark about Miss Powys, Sophy?”

“What remark?” returned the companion, stolidly.

“Why, that she would be vexed or disappointed if he stayed here to dinner.”

“Did I say that?” replied Miss Wheeler. “Hardly as much, I think. If I did, it was only what I thought. I suppose that the cousins are engaged, or something like it; and it is natural that they should like to be together. Mr. Beaumont evidently wished to excuse himself, so I gave him what little help I could; it is not much I can do, or ever pretend to do in that way, and you must forgive me if I took too much upon myself.”

"Nonsense, Sophy! that's stuff! You know I have always wished you *would* come forward a little more; it was not *that*—only—for my part I don't think there is much truth in this report of his engagement to his cousin, and so it seems a pity to talk as if one believed in it."

Sophy Wheeler smiled.

"If it is not true, I do not think we shall talk Mr. Beaumont into an engagement; and if it *is* true, as I fancy, it is as well, perhaps, that he should not forget it, both on his account and on that of others."

"Meaning my niece Ruth, I suppose?"

"I mean any young lady that he, like many other men, engaged though he may be, is still disposed to flirt with."

Lady Cunliffe ruminated some seconds on her companion's speech, and then said suddenly,

“Do you know, Sophy—I daresay it may seem very absurd to you—but do you know, when we were staying at Baden-Baden together, a year or two ago, I rather fancied he seemed disposed to admire you.”

Miss Wheeler turned a shade sallow than her natural tint, and forced a laugh as she replied,

“If such was the case, there must have been a singular dearth of youth and beauty there!”

“Well, there was this same cousin, Miss Powys, there.”

“Yes—a child of sixteen, and a very childish girl of her age; but it is all nonsense, he might have talked to me because he liked my singing; and there were not many Englishwomen there at that time (and Mr. Beaumont is very English in all his tastes and fancies—much more so than I

am) ; but our friendship—if you may call it so—was not of long continuance ; and, besides, when the Beaumonts first made our acquaintance, they hardly knew how very small a place I occupied in the social scale which regulates so many people's likings and dislikings."

Lady Cunliffe listened to this longish speech of her *protégée's* with all due deference, and not caring to say much about Ruth, or her speculation on her behalf, feeling instinctively they would find scant sympathy. She composed herself to take a slight nap after her morning exertions, and silence soon reigned in the quiet, cheerful-looking room.

Then it was that Sophy Wheeler, in that soft gloaming, dropped her work, and followed the train of her busy thoughts, which, truth to say, were neither pleasurable nor

profitable. Still, in the dim twilight of the shaded lamp, which shed its subdued rays on Lady Cunliffe's slumbering form and sealed eyes, and with her own bent on the strange fantastic figures which she conjured up in the fire, Sophy Wheeler's waking dreams partook somewhat of their dim and shadowy nature. Yet it was true there was no joy either in her recollections or her anticipations. She had seen her youth glide away, leaving only the memory of the bitterest disappointment and sorrow that a woman's heart can suffer. She had been (as she supposed) beloved, and had loved, when in the first blush of her youth and good looks, and in the opening promise of her great musical talents. She had loved with all the passion of her undisciplined heart. She believed herself on the point of marriage with the object of her idolatrous affec-

tion—a man older by several years than herself, but very fascinating in manner and appearance, besides possessing all the *prestige* of rank and fashion.

Miss Wheeler's own sphere of society was quite apart from his, so she was not aware of that which all the world knew, that Lord D—— was a married man, and that he and his wife, from incompatibility of tastes and temper, saw but little of each other. In Sophy Wheeler's unfriended orphan state (with only those protectors to whom her talents had recommended her as likely to become a source of profit), she was, although the daughter of a gentleman, and well educated, peculiarly exposed to such temptation as had now assailed her.

It was at that time (some ten years ago) that fate, or a kind Providence, brought Lady Cunliffe in her way. The kind-hearted

widow of two successive husbands recognised in Sophy Wheeler the daughter of her first husband's earliest and dearest friend. Suffice it to say, Sophy was rescued, with some difficulty, from her perilous situation, but at a sacrifice which nearly cost her her life. In the brain-fever that followed the speedy desertion of her lover, on finding his prey in safe and unassailable guardianship, poor Sophy nearly lost her life and her reason, whilst her beauty and her voice suffered severely. The latter was restored by degrees to something of its former tone and loveliness, but the sweetness and pathos alone remained; the wonderful power and brilliancy were gone. She had lost in her illness that which would have made it invaluable as a means of securing fame and fortune to herself. Her good looks had also vanished, and the beautiful hair, which was one of her

greatest attractions, had never been renewed in anything like its former luxuriance or silken texture.

A change in many ways had passed over Sophy Wheeler, of which no one was more conscious than herself. But this knowledge only wrought in her a sort of blind anger against some unseen hand she fancied directed especially against herself, or else a kind of apathetic indifference to all that could happen to herself in the world. Lady Cunliffe had nursed and petted her through her long illness, and, in her very solitary position, formed a sort of attachment to the girl she had rescued, and whom she looked upon as a sort of connecting link with the long past happy days when Frank Wheeler was the chosen friend and companion of Harry Mordaunt, the husband of her early love.

That Sophy Wheeler was a moody, unsociable object to expend her superfluous regard upon, did not operate very strongly in her prejudice with the kind-hearted widow. Lady Cunliffe wanted some one to become her constant companion, and the friendless girl was alone also, and in every respect so destitute as to need such a patroness, so the two made a sort of silent compact to cling together for better and worse. It was fortunate that Lady Cunliffe's extreme ease of temper and disposition took all her *protégée's* peculiarities with good-humoured toleration, and, by degrees, a sort of harmony was established between them, that was rarely disturbed by word or deed on the part of either.

During the past ten years these two women had lived together; there had not arisen the least prospect to the younger of

changing her place or position, for it may be supposed that Sophy Wheeler was by no means an attractive person. Occasionally, whilst exercising her musical talents, it had occurred that some devotee of the art would become almost spell-bound for a time ; and whilst under the influence of the charm, would bestow on Miss Wheeler a little of that attention and admiration which had been the daily food of her earlier life.

It was to something of that sort on the part of Mr. Beaumont, in the early days of their acquaintance, that Lady Cunliffe had referred almost laughingly when talking to Sophy a short time before she composed herself to sleep ; and it was on that remark that the companion's thoughts dwelt, with a strange bitterness as it recurred to her mind. There was a mingling of other and softer thoughts and recollections, no doubt, in the

solitary woman's mind, as she sat gazing almost sternly into the fire. She drew, for the first time, a comparison between herself and Ruth Maxwell. That idea was also very bitter, as she thought—

“Once I was as handsome as she is. I am only ten years older than she, and some women of five-and-thirty are as good-looking as ever they were; but I have lost everything—everything that makes life happy! No one loves me—no one cares for me! Lady Cunliffe finds me a useful companion. I do not complain of her—she is kind to me according to her nature, and she is fond of music in a sort of dull way, that seeks some pleasure without the trouble of enjoyment—she would as soon be sung to sleep, like a child in its cradle, as rouse herself to listen to the finest melody that ever was composed. Heigho! I am not fit for much

now, so there is no use in complaining, for I delight not man—or woman either, for the matter of that. *She* never cares whether Mr. Beaumont or Mr. anybody else might really like me—no, no; that is all at an end. I must not think of what has been—my head begins to turn when *that* thought comes uppermost—but it has been, for all that. Well, what was I thinking about? Oh! Ruth Maxwell. I see as plainly as possible she is falling—falling—ah! no wonder people talk of *falling* in love! And he?—well, he likes her well enough, and perhaps all the better that there is another in the way. What will they do? No good can come of it, for that little girl, the cousin, with all the good things that this world can give, cares for nothing in it but that one peerless man. Oh! the stupid absurdity of a girl's love! I can see it all

—for have I not suffered too? And that Ruth, with all her demureness, what will become of her? Well, well, it is rather pleasant to have outlived all one's feelings, and to sit by and see what wonderful fools people can make of themselves, whilst they consider themselves so far beyond the reach of common observation, and hiding their own eyes, they see nothing, and fancy all the world is blind."

In some such guise did Miss Wheeler's thoughts clothe themselves; nor was it till Lady Cunliffe had roused herself, and twice asked what o'clock it was, that Sophy shook off her fit of abstraction, and rose to look at the clock. As she crossed the room, she passed the window where the drawn curtain was not entirely closed, and remarked a bright streak, whilst at the same moment a confused noise, like distant cries and

shouts, reached her ears. Miss Wheeler hastily drew back the curtain, and a flood of reflected light rushed into the room. Sophy, startled out of her usual apathetic indifference, made some exclamation, which drew the lady of the house from her recumbent position to her side in an instant. Lady Cunliffe stood and gazed for a moment, then echoed her companion's remark, as she in her turn exclaimed—

“To be sure it *is* a fire, and a frightful one, down in Castleford. Dear me, how terrible! Ring the bell, Sophy; let us ask if any of the servants know anything about it. It must have broken out very suddenly.”

The bell was rung, and answered promptly, so was the lady's question, by—

“Oh! yes, my lady, to be sure there is no doubt about it. It is the great Brewery.”

CHAPTER III.

RUTH MAXWELL, on leaving Lady Cunliffe's house, walked rapidly down the hill which led into the town, and was barely a mile from that part where her own home was situated. The rain had ceased, but the evening was chilly and uncomfortable. Still Ruth had a glow at her heart, and such a bright sensation of happiness within that she was hardly sensible of any outward discomfort; neither was she at any time afraid of finding herself alone, though at that hour it was rapidly growing dark. She had led too independent a life, and been too much in the habit of taking care

of herself and others, to have any fantastic fears. The road was, however, in some places rough, and Ruth thought, with satisfaction, that, as she drew nearer the town, no doubt she should find the lamps lighted. She had shaken off the momentary oppression caused by Miss Wheeler's remark ; indeed from the moment she had parted from Louis Beaumont, and had felt her hand so fondly detained in his, a perfect trust and reassurance had reigned in her heart, and had since rendered her impervious to all sensations of discomfort.

So Ruth walked on with her natural and peculiar grace of movement, little impeded by the inequalities of the way. She had arrived at the bottom of the lane, and was turning to enter the nearest street, when through the dusk she became sensible of an unusual stir and bustle

going on at some distance. People seemed to be running together—surges of confused noise and of many voices reached her ears, and she stood still, as her way lay in an opposite direction. Then Ruth began to feel impatient for the lamps to be lighted, that something might be revealed to her sight as well as hearing. Surely it was past the usual time, she thought; and then at that moment a bright distant light attracted her attention, and the thought followed, “Well, I hope the light will soon come in this direction; so I shall wait and watch a minute or two.”

No one, however, came to enlighten Ruth, so she stood patiently looking down the street and across the broad market-place, where at the opening of a farther street the crowd seemed congregating, and from whence the noise and bustle emanated. Whilst Ruth

stood listening and straining her eyes into the dark and distant mass, another light became visible, but this time it was a distinct jet of fire shot up into the sky, and then came a distant roar of loud cries and many voices; and Ruth's heart began to beat quickly and thickly, as she surmised at once that an awful calamity was near. A sound of crying and running steps then drew near, and Ruth called to a child that was making its way along the street where she stood. The boy, it appeared, knew her when she spoke, and she recognized him as the child of one of John Penrose's workmen, and as frequenting the school where she taught. So she detained the child, who seemed in an agony of fear, and said he was running to fetch his father, who was from home, and the great Brewery was on fire, and all the workmen's row of houses close to it likely to be burnt

also ; they had sent for the fire-engine, and his father was wanted to help. Whilst Ruth stood, and in her gentle tone soothed and talked to the boy, promising to go to his mother, who was ill in bed, if he would just leave a line at her own home after he had sent his father from a house close by. Whilst she was still speaking, another step drew near, and another voice sounded in her ear ; and a delightful sense of safety and protection stole over all her senses, as the voice said :

“I am so thankful to have overtaken you. What a night for you to be out alone in!”

“Yes, it is likely to be a terrible night, I fear, for many of those poor people,” returned Ruth trembling.


“Let me take you home at once,” said Louis Beaumont in reply.

"I cannot go yet," replied Ruth, half ashamed to feel so guiltily glad at finding herself in his presence ; adding, by way of explanation, "I have promised little Johnny White to go and stay with his mother, who is too ill to leave her bed ; and he is gone to fetch his father, who is somewhere our way, and I have scribbled a line in the dark for him to let my mother know where I am, and leave it with her."

"And where does this woman live?" asked Mr. Beaumont, drawing Ruth's unresisting hand through his arm, and turning to accompany her.

"In 'Brewer's Row,'" answered Ruth simply, naming the place where all Mr. Penrose's workmen lived, and which was close to the Brewery.

"And so you purpose going into the very midst of this horrible fire?" said he, as they



walked quickly on to the place of destination.

"I promised the boy, and I may be of some help, perhaps, in getting the poor woman away."

"I cannot let you go," said Louis, after a few minutes' delicious silence, as they approached the place where a dense crowd surrounded the now flaming building, where the engines were already busily at work.


"Indeed you must," answered Ruth. "You will have your part to do, no doubt; and mine is comparatively a very easy one."

Louis Beaumont only pressed the hand that rested on his arm still closer to his side; but Ruth at that moment quickly withdrew it, for they had come out of the quiet deserted street into one all alight with a fierce blazing heat, and all eyes seemed

to her imagination turned with a questioning gaze on the new-comers; and even in the midst of that scene of wild terror and excitement people seemed to wonder what brought those two together to that appalling scene.

“Well, go then, angel as you are, on your work of mercy,” whispered Mr. Beaumont, still detaining her hand, regardless for the moment of everything in the world but Ruth Maxwell, “but remember, if you want me—that is, if you require help—I shall be here, thinking and looking for you till I see you again in safety. There, at the foot of the old stone cross in the market-place, I will look for you from time to time.”

“Come, sir, will you take a bucket?” exclaimed a rough voice close to them at that moment, and a man black with smoke



held one up to Mr. Beaumont. Louis mechanically took it, saying,

“Yes, I will join you in a moment; but stay, tell me, where is Mr. Penrose himself?”

“Away, sir, away—more’s the pity; they have taken the opportunity of being up in London for a day or two, to do the mischief; and the managing man’s lying ill, so they have it all their own way—no one knows what’s best to be done.”

It was then that Mr. Beaumont, casting his eye over the fiery pile of buildings towards the street down which Ruth was bending her steps, saw the great danger which all the row of workmen’s houses ran, as the wind, though not very high, set that way. He therefore took upon himself to order the nearest of those, which was still untouched, to be pulled down, so that there

might be no channel of communication between them and the great mass of burning buildings.

As soon as this order was given, and favourably received, he ran after Ruth, who had just reached the door of the house where she felt her presence would be most needed, in case of the flames spreading in that direction. He rushed after her, saying as he reached her,

"Have no fear, you will be safe! Stay there till I come and fetch you away. Promise me. You need not move the woman, only, I entreat, do not leave the house till you see me again."

"Very well," was all the answer given; but Ruth looked wistfully up in the eager, handsome face. Still, she would not say, as many women might have done, "Take

care of yourself!" She felt it was a time to think of others only.

So Louis Beaumont went away to his task, which he fulfilled nobly, setting the example of a courageous daring, with due regard to all needful precautions, that saved many lives that eventful evening, but was of little avail as regarded property. The great main building had been set on fire in many points, and had smouldered unperceived till it broke out, and the help came too late to save any part. The great achievement of the evening was in pulling down the house, according to Mr. Beaumont's directions, and he was to be seen doing more than his own share of work, and issuing his orders in all directions. It was, in some respects, a perilous undertaking, and he did not escape wholly unscathed.

Meanwhile Ruth, with a heart still flutter-

ing with fear, and yet a strange joy predominating over all other sensations, took up her station by the bedside of the invalid woman. It was, indeed, well she was there to do so, for the poor creature was half frantic from the fear of being burnt in her bed, and yet quite incapable of leaving it, or even crawling downstairs, and getting out of the house. With true motherly instinct she had sent her children out of the way as soon as she understood the nature of the danger that threatened them. Her husband was out, and the generality of her neighbours too much self-engrossed to have time to attend to her. So the poor creature remained alone, with her helpless infant in her arms, trembling with apprehension.

The sight of Ruth's sweet, calm face, and the sound of her re-assuring voice, were indeed as those of an angel to the terrified woman.

And Ruth, in soothing her fears, brought peace to her own mind, which was somewhat troubled and distressed with fear of danger to him who had just left her. And then, as Ruth sat by the humble bedside, she was close to the little casement-window from which she had drawn back the scanty curtain, and thence both she and her patient could watch the reflection of the flames, as they alternately rose high in the air, or sunk beneath the play of the persevering engines. At last they had the unspeakable satisfaction of seeing they gradually subsided; and when Ruth, after a long, dreamy reverie, turned to communicate the glad tidings to the woman beside her, she had the comfort of finding that she actually slept.

Whilst all this was occurring at no great distance from her house, Mrs. Maxwell was quietly following her own solitary, every-

day pursuits. After Ruth left her in the morning, for a visit to her aunt, her parting words had been—

“Do not hurry home, dear. I know Lady Cunliffe likes to have you for an hour or two, and I have plenty to do, so I shall not expect you till I see you again.”

Perhaps Mrs. Maxwell was not without hopes that when Ruth did come home, she might bring her—as she often did—some stray tidings of her son or daughter; perhaps she might fall in with them herself, or hear of them from others. She had begun to content herself, poor, desolate mother, with such husks as these, instead of more natural and substantial food, to satisfy the cravings of her maternal hunger.

Then, when the rain set in, she waited patiently till it should subside, hoping Ruth would not think of returning home till it

had ceased. And then, as the day began to wane, and the rain to abate, she looked out, in the full expectation of seeing Ruth coming home, and it was about the time that Ruth had actually turned her steps in that direction.

It was whilst often walking to the window that Mrs. Maxwell became aware of some strange stir in the outer world, though from the house standing back within its own gates from the street, she could see but little of what was going on. Then she saw in the darkening sky the first jet of flame that burst out of the smouldering building, and heard the same distant roar of voices that had startled Ruth; and soon after the two servants came in, each with her tale of fire and fear; and then all was fully confirmed by the little boy who was the bearer of Ruth's almost illegible message.

There was, however, nothing very appalling to Mrs. Maxwell in the announcement that Ruth was gone to offer what help she could in time of need. It had occurred too often before to call for any particular apprehension. She, too, as the wife of a medical man, accustomed often to act with him and for him amongst his poorer patients, and to see Ruth doing the same, thought it but natural in the present instance. She had no fear of Ruth's running heedlessly into danger. She only wished she was strong enough to follow and help; but knowing she was unfit to do so, she sat down in quiet patience to wait her return, whilst she speculated on what she might be able to do with her the following morning for the sufferers that night.

An hour or two passed away. It was some time after their usual hour of dinner; but Ruth was right in surmising that Mrs.

Maxwell would not sit down to that meal alone—she thought she would wait till Ruth came home ; and if she had not come at all, she would have had her cup of tea, and dispensed with dinner. So she sat on, and kept her place by the window, where she had the comfort of seeing that the engines and brave helping men were doing their work successfully, as the diminishing strength of the flames amply testified.

“Oh ! ma’am, the fire’s out at last !” exclaimed one of the maids, breaking in upon her mistress’s solitude.

“So I see, Lucy ; and am very thankful that it is so. We shall soon have Miss Ruth home now.”

“Yes, ma’am—so I thought. Had not I better be taking the dinner up ? Cook says it is all spoiling.”

“Never mind that, Lucy—we will wait

till she comes home—I daresay she will want some ; and I think now I hear steps on the gravel, and a ring at the bell—run and see, and come back and tell me—it may only be some message.”

Downstairs ran eager Lucy, and up again a minute afterwards.

“ Yes, yes, ma’am, you are quite right, it is Miss Ruth ; and—and a gentleman with her ; and he is coming in ! ”

CHAPTER IV.

A GENTLEMAN was with her! Mrs. Maxwell started for a moment on hearing these words; then as quickly almost smiled at herself for doing so as she thought, "Yes, it must be Mr. Penrose—of course it was him; and most natural that it should be so. Ruth had been on her errand of kindness to one of his cottages, he was doubtless on the spot, seeing after his own property, and it was the most likely thing in the world that he should see her home." Still there was a strange fluttering at her heart, her hands trembled, so she could hardly place them on the arms of the chair,

as she tried to rise and steady her faltering footsteps. "What folly is this?" she thought—"I must have been frightening myself about Ruth, all the time I fancied I was so calm! What a poor weak creature am I become!"

In another moment Ruth was by her side. She was very pale, but quiet and calm as she came up to Mrs. Maxwell's chair and said,

"Dear mother, I am so sorry to disturb you, and I hope you will not think me to blame, but I have asked him to come in for a minute or two and rest; he would see me home, as all the town is running about to-night, and I found he was so much more hurt than I supposed, so I begged him to come and rest here; he has sent for a fly to go home."

"He! and who is he?—are you talking

of Mr. Penrose, Ruth?" asked Mrs. Maxwell.

"Oh! no, mother! I am very stupid, but it has been a trying evening," said poor Ruth, sitting down and taking off her hat and shawl. "Of course it is Mr. Beaumont I mean; he has been directing everything this evening, and leading the way, and his arm is sadly hurt by a piece of falling timber, so I asked him to rest here till the fly comes. He would not send home for a carriage, for fear of his sister being frightened. But do not worry, mother dear," continued Ruth, in her innocence, observing the strange expression of Mrs. Maxwell's face; "do not let his being here annoy you, dear, for he will very soon be gone, and you need not see him."

Poor Ruth! She little thought of the dagger she was thrusting deep, deep into her

mother's heart. No, *she* need not go near her own son ! She was nothing to him. She must keep her distance ; whilst Ruth, her step-daughter, dictated to her what was to be done, and could go to him, and feel sure that she was welcome ! Was ever woman so sorely tried before ? Again the angry feeling against Ruth rose fiercely in the mother's breast, and she seemed nerved with fresh strength as she rose and walked rapidly across the room. Ruth, weary and almost faint with all she had gone through, was resting with closed eyes in a chair by the fireside, and only heard the movement made by her step-mother, little dreaming of the influences that were at work ; and only fearing that the sudden introduction of a stranger into the house had vexed her mother, she called to her again not to mind Mr. Beaumont resting for a few minutes in the

room downstairs; he would soon be gone, and would not want to see any one whilst he was there. At that moment Lucy entered the room with a scared look, and approaching Mrs. Maxwell, said in a low voice, as if to prevent Ruth from hearing,

“Please don’t be angry, ma’am, but the gentleman that Miss Ruth brought home has fainted dead away!”

And then Lucy, looking horror-struck, waited to see what impression this tale made upon her mistress. But Ruth had heard, and in a moment was on her feet, though feeling giddy and rather likely to follow the example of her friend. She was beginning, “Oh! mother, let us go to him,” when Mrs. Maxwell, suddenly becoming composed, and with a new inspiration at her heart, which softened every look and tone, and dispelled every evil feeling, laid her hand on Ruth’s


arm, and gently forcing her back into the chair, exclaimed,

“No, child, you are not equal to it, but I am, and I had rather go alone; it is fitting that you should remain here.”

Ruth sank back into her chair as Mrs. Maxwell turned to leave the room, unable to disobey her, and feeling glad that her mother had thus been induced to take into her own hands the hospitable task of seeing to their suffering guest herself. As Mrs. Maxwell with a firm step descended the stairs, which were broad and shallow, she only asked in a low voice,

“How was it, Lucy?”

“Oh! ma'am, the gentleman looked awful white and bad when he and Miss Ruth came in at the door, and then Miss Ruth said Mr. Someone—I did not catch the name, for Miss Ruth said it quick like, and



low—well, she said he had got badly hurt putting out the fire, and was come in to rest till the fly came to pick him up to go home somewhere ; and then she said, would I go and get some water in a glass, and bring a little brandy too (which I was quite glad to do), and she would go upstairs, and tell you all about it. And then, after a while, when I went in with the tray and glasses, and went up to the poor gentleman, he was quite gone—knew nothing and nobody, but sat back in the chair in a dead swoon. I was quite taken aback by it, and feared, ma'am, you might be vexed at Miss Ruth bringing the gentleman in when he was so bad."

All this information Lucy ran off with astonishing glibness, as Mrs. Maxwell stopped for a moment at the foot of the stairs, and paused, as if for breath, before

entering the room. Mrs. Maxwell only said in reply,

“No, Lucy, I am not at all vexed or annoyed—Miss Ruth did quite right. Now go into the kitchen, and wait there, and if I want anything I will ring; and you must come as quickly as you can—but do not come unless I ring. The fewer there are in the room when he comes round the better, and I know quite well how to manage.”

Thus dismissed, Lucy sought her own precincts, and Mrs. Maxwell proceeded alone to the room which contained her son.

It was indeed a strange chance which had thus brought him to her, and had given him back to her in that unconscious state which would allow her to indulge, for a few minutes, at least, the deep yearnings of her mother's heart, without fear of recognition

or repulse. For the gratification of this almost irresistible impulse and longing, Mrs. Maxwell resolutely strove to be calm—to crush down every rebellious feeling which could interfere with the accomplishment of her wish ; and so doing, she seemed to feel as if supernatural strength was for the moment granted. Then, with a brief prayer, she passed quickly through the half-open door, and soon, with noiseless footsteps, she reached the chair where the quiet form was reclining.

Half terrified at the prospect of finding him worse than when the servant left him, Mrs. Maxwell drew near, and, to her unspeakable comfort, found her son was only in a deep, exhausted—though almost death-like—sleep. It was no swoon—she knew enough to see that at the first glance. Still the slumber was so heavy that he never

stirred when she laid her trembling finger on his pulse, and then gently pressed her lips upon his brow. Still he slept on calmly, and even faintly smiled, as if in recognition of the mute caress. Then the mother, kneeling at his side in the dim light, devoured with her longing gaze every lineament of the beloved face so fondly remembered. She could trace in the well cut features of the manly face before her the half unformed ones of the handsome boy who had been the pride and delight of her early life, and, with a lingering, loving gaze, scanned each of them ; then she passed her hand lightly over the thick, dark curls which were, at that time, all matted and dishevelled with the heat and toil of his late exertions.

Louis Beaumont had always been noted for the almost feminine beauty of his hands

and she fondly remembered it had been so in his childhood ; and these, as they now hung listlessly down on either side of the chair, were in turn gently lifted and caressed by the poor mother, as she placed them more at rest. Yes, her eyes dwelt long on those dear hands, which were the same that had been so often clasped in hers, when she first taught the baby fingers to twine round her own, or lifted them in the child's first prayer. Whilst she knelt there, the long years of separation melted away, and she seemed to be the young, proud mother, in her early married home, watching her first-born, even as he now slept before her ; and then an unutterable sensation of peace and comfort stole over her desolate heart.

But the moments flew on ; the sound of coming wheels broke upon the stillness of

that sacred hour, and soon the door-bell sounded, and Mrs. Maxwell started to her feet. At the same time, the sleeper, as if disturbed from some happy dream, roused himself, and looked round for a moment, unconscious; then a sudden movement of the injured arm brought back a remembrance of all that had occurred, and as he sat up in the chair, and looked round for his late companion, his eyes fell on the watchful face bent over him. A sensation of disappointment was the result of the first glance in that anxious, faded face; then, as it quickly withdrew itself from the reach of his observation, the young man, with returning recollection, forced himself to say,

“I fear I have been very troublesome, and have been inflicting my company unconsciously for a most unreasonable time.”

“Oh, no!” said the voice behind him,

“you are very welcome here. I only wish we could have done more for you.”


The words were uttered irresistibly. Mrs. Maxwell had not intended speaking—she had only desired to look upon her child. She utterly scorned the idea of being known as a stranger to him, but she could not resist answering when he spoke; and there was a peculiar melancholy sweetness in her voice that struck with a strange cadence on the young man's ear, and seemed almost to knock at the door of his heart. The effect was such as to make him exclaim cordially,

“You are very kind! I have had a most refreshing sleep, and I do believe, Mrs. Maxwell (I am sure it must be Miss Maxwell's mother I am speaking to), that I am indebted to your watchful care for it. I shall go home all the brighter and fresher

for it, and so avoid scaring my people there with my ghastly looks."

At that moment the carriage, or rather the fly, was announced, and Mr. Beaumont arose in obedience to its summons. Fortunately, with the vehicle came a medical man, well known to the family at Harewood Park, and who, hearing of Mr. Beaumont's accident, and the order of a carriage from the hotel, came also to see if his services were required ; so to his care, with a few murmured, almost inarticulate words, Mrs. Maxwell committed her (apparently) stranger-guest. And Mr. Dalton, with professional ease, took possession of his patient, and helping him into the carriage, took his place beside him, and the two drove away together.


Then Mrs. Maxwell turned to ascend the stairs ; her hand was pressed upon



her heart, as if to still its painful throbs, whilst she felt confused with a mixed sensation of bitterness and joy. Still the vision of her son was now something real and tangible; she could now at pleasure recall the features of his face, the tone of his voice. Her ear was yet vibrating with the sound of the one, whilst the warm pressure of his hand at parting still thrilled through her frame. All that was joy, unmistakable and real; yet it was soon dashed and almost extinguished by the reflection that, had he known it was *she*—the mother he had renounced in his early boyhood—all would have been withheld from her.

Slowly and sorrowfully she walked upstairs as this conviction came to mar her transient joy, and there at the top, leaning over the banisters, she found her step-daughter, who eagerly asked for tidings of

their late guest. Mrs. Maxwell answered, in so wearied and dejected a tone, that he seemed much better, and was gone home, that Ruth immediately took alarm on her mother's account, fearing she might have over-taxed her strength either of mind or body. In that belief she carefully guided her into her sitting-room, and placed her in her own particular chair; then insisted on her drinking a cup of coffee, which she had in readiness, talking cheerfully all the while, and telling Mrs. Maxwell how much good the coffee had already done in her own case. Mrs. Maxwell submitted, as she often did, to Ruth's gentle guidance, and mechanically obeyed, drinking her coffee, and resting her weary head against the cushion that Ruth placed to receive it. Then Ruth seated herself at her step-mother's side, and was soon deep in her own thoughts; whilst



Mrs. Maxwell also kept silence for a time. Ruth was startled out of her pleasant waking dream by Mrs. Maxwell's abrupt, and, to her, somewhat irrelevant inquiry,

"Nothing can really ever break the bond between a mother and her son, can it, Ruth?"

"I think not," replied Ruth, who fancied her mother's thoughts were dwelling on her dead children; and adding, "We know that they will meet again—they are only gone a little before—the same bond exists that united them here."


"It is a very holy bond, Ruth."

"Indeed, I think it must be—a very sacred one—almost more so than any other earthly relationship, because it was the only one assumed by our Saviour in this world."

"Yes, Ruth, I have often thought of that."

“And what a comfort it must prove to many a mourning mother,” continued Ruth, in a low, reverential tone, “to feel how fully and entirely our Lord can sympathise with their grief, for in the last hour of his own sore agony, he remembered his mother’s anguish, and sought to lessen the bitterness of her bereavement by commending her to the care of his own beloved disciple. It shows he entered into the depth of the mother’s sorrow when the sword pierced her soul, so, no doubt, every poor bereaved mother may feel that He sees and knows all, and compassionates her peculiar case of trial as none other can do.”

Mrs. Maxwell made no reply for some minutes, though a few silent tears escaped from her closed eyelids; and then she said,



"All that is most true ; but there are other separations sometimes between mother and son—even more painful than death. I mean when misunderstanding, or other causes exist, and bring about life-long estrangements."

"That is not common, we must hope, mother," said Ruth, by no means comprehending the application of such a case to any she knew of.

"It must be very wrong where it does exist, Ruth."

"I am sure it must be, mother. And where both the mother and son are good and sincere Christians, it could never last for any time."

"You think a good man could never retain anger against a mother who had loved him all her life, then—eh, Ruth?"

"I am sure of it, mother. But why do

you ask? Are you thinking of any particular case you may have heard of to-day? Have any of the people we know behaved ill to their mother? If so, we must try and set them right again. Who is it?"

"Oh! no one—I mean nothing—but I am tired—good night, Ruth."

CHAPTER V.

THERE was great excitement in Castleford about this fire at the Brewery long after it was extinguished. There was too abundant reason to suppose that it was the work of an incendiary, and both public and private inquiry was largely at work in endeavouring to trace the author of the calamity. That it was likely to prove rather an extensive misfortune to Mr. Penrose there was little room to doubt. He had just enlarged his premises very considerably, and the new buildings were fitted up at a very great expense, and it soon became known

that this new part was not insured. His journey to London was partly on that account, and it was evident that the occasion of his absence had been seized upon to work the mischief.

The new row of workmen's cottages would, there was little doubt, have been also consumed, had it not been for the timely interference of Mr. Beaumont; and, as those houses were not insured, the loss would have been proportionably increased.

Mr. Penrose arrived as soon as it was possible, after the receipt of the telegram which had been dispatched on the first outbreak of the calamity. When he reached Castleford, however, nothing remained of his new and extensive buildings—just finished, and put into fine working order—but a smoking heap of ruins. It was disastrous enough, and calculated to depress any man's spirits who

had not a more than common share of energy and perseverance. Happily John Penrose's spirit was, although somewhat cast down, by no means extinguished by his disasters.

"It might have been worse!" said he to himself, on returning home, after a careful survey, and rough estimate of his misfortunes. "If it had not been for Beaumont's energy and help, all those new cottages must have gone too. Well, I must go and thank him, in the first place. I wonder what *she* will say to it all?"

It may be supposed that the "she" of his meditations referred to Maude Beaumont.

The next morning found Mr. Penrose arriving at Harewood Park, his object being to return thanks, and hear what "she" would have to say on the occasion. He was shown, in the first instance, into Mr. Beaumont's own room, where that gentleman sat

in a loose sleeve, solacing his solitary state with a cigar. The two friends exchanged a hearty handshake, Mr. Beaumont offering his left hand, with a laugh at his disabled condition.

"I am thankful you are able to laugh about it. I was told you were very seriously hurt, and I feel like the guilty cause of it all, in having been absent that unlucky night."

"You could have done nothing more, Penrose, I believe, if you had been on the spot. The firemen did their duty bravely enough, poor fellows, as they always do! But it was difficult enough, as the flames burst out at three or four different places all at once."

"Ah! there it is! If I could but lay my finger on the man!" exclaimed Mr. Penrose, with an expression of angry determination

that boded ill for the culprit when discovered.

The two then talked of the ways and means to accomplish this desirable end, and then Louis Beaumont expressed his hope that the losses on the occasion were not quite so extensive as report proclaimed them. To this friendly inquiry John Penrose replied, lightly,

“The misfortune is not half as big as it might have been, had all my new row of houses gone too! You know I was up in town about the insurance. It was partly my own fault, being so dilatory about it; but we are so well guarded in the way of casualties in fire, that I took my own time. In fact, nothing but the most diabolical malice could have accomplished such a work of destruction.”

Then after a time Mr. Penrose looked

round the snug apartment, and observed,

“I wonder at your choosing to sit here, when you can have such pleasant society in the drawing-room.”

“I am afraid,” returned Louis Beaumont with a smile, “that men in general are not sufficiently appreciative of their sisters’ society, not but that I have a high regard for that of my own, at certain times and seasons.”

“I should think so !” exclaimed Mr. Penrose fervently ; to which Mr. Beaumont made no reply, except by emitting a slight puff of smoke ; and Mr. Penrose continued, “I wish I had a sister—but wishes are vain enough, I know, and I am not given to entertain vain visions ; but you, you have a cousin as well, and can never want society.”

This remark was made rather *sotto voce*, as if more to himself than to his companion,

but it was accompanied with a slight glance of inquiry, which Louis Beaumont was quick to perceive, and answered by saying,

“Yes, I am doubly lucky in having a charming cousin, who is quite the same as a sister to me.”

Mr. Penrose merely inclined his head a little at this remark, as if it was one he had no right either to question or discuss; at the same time rather wondering that Mr. Beaumont, who was usually considered so reserved, should take the trouble of casually informing him that Miss Powys was the same as a sister to him? Could there be any truth in the report which began to get whispered about, that Mr. Beaumont was paying attention to Ruth Maxwell; that they had often been seen walking together (only for short distances in the streets at Castleford); that he had been told, though he

had not thought much about it at the time, that on the night of the fire they came together to the spot; and that Mr. Beaumont, after all was over, fetched Miss Maxwell away from the cottage, where she had remained all the time he was engaged in assisting? But as Mr. Beaumont made no mention himself of Miss Maxwell, it was not for him to drag her name without cause into their present conversation; but the idea, as it just presented itself to his mind, was not altogether a pleasant one; he could hardly tell why, but there were many other thoughts arising from and dependent upon it, so he felt he would rather put it away for the present. Whilst thus ruminating, Louis Beaumont, who was also apparently lost in thought, though still engaged with his cigar, looked up, and seeing his friend, who had declined his proffered cigar, thus absent though still present, said,

"Come, Penrose! I see you have got thinking over your troubles, till they no doubt look very black. Come, suppose we go into the other room for a little change of scene and society?"

The two young men then rose and went into the usual morning room, where they found Maude Beaumont and her cousin. As they came upon them rather suddenly, through an adjoining conservatory, Mr. Penrose had an opportunity of observing that neither of the girls wore her brightest looks. Maude sat at a table with some materials for painting before her, but seemingly had done little except dabble her brush in the water and make sundry *impromptu* dashes of colour, which were afterwards obliterated. She spoke from time to time to Gwendoline, but more frequently looked at her when unperceived; and whilst

doing so, Maude's countenance exhibited a curious mixture of expression, half anxious, half annoyed. Miss Powys sat in a low lounging chair at a little distance from her cousin, apparently engaged in reading, but the book generally lay upon her lap, and her eyes were cast in profound meditation on the fire as often as on its pages. Maude was just saying as they approached,

"I think, Gwen, you might as well read something to me, there is no use in talking when we don't agree."

And then Gwendoline replied despondently,

"I would read to you, Maude, only I don't think there is anything in this book that would amuse you. I think it is as dull and stupid as everything else."

"Well, I hope there is something coming now to relieve our dulness," exclaimed

Maude, as her quick eye fell on the two approaching figures; then, after shaking hands with Mr. Penrose, she continued, "I am very glad to see you at last. I suppose you are come to return thanks to Louis for all his exertions on your behalf, though I am half angry with you for being the occasion of his running into all kinds of perils that horrible evening."

Mr. Penrose answered in the same light tone, but observed that Mr. Beaumont took little part in the discussion, and that Miss Powys, after saying she hoped all the danger was over, sat turning over the leaves of her book, and occasionally studying Mr. Beaumont's profile as he sat near. Once when he moved his injured arm somewhat uneasily, Gwendoline bent forward with an anxious inquiry.

"I am sure that chair does not rest your

arm properly, Louis. Does not it pain you more than it did?"

Maude knit her brow, and her brother answered,

"No, thanks. I am all right; but it must take a day or two, Gwen, before I can be as active as usual."

"That horrid fire!" muttered Gwendoline.

"Yes," said Maude. "We all wish he had been as far from it as *you* were, Mr. Penrose."

"That's the unkindest cut of all," returned he, laughing uneasily. "As if my absence was voluntary, and as if I had thrown all the onus of the proceeding on my good friend here!"

"Oh! no, we exempt you entirely from such a selfish proceeding, as you very well know; but—may I ask?—you need not answer unless you please—how came it that

that young lady, whom we know as 'Lady Cunliffe's niece,' should have had such intuition of it all as to be on the spot to help all the workmen's families?"

John Penrose looked steadily for a moment in the beautiful face of the girl who spoke to him; then, after a moment's pause, as if waiting for some further explanation, he said,

"You were right, Miss Beaumont, to tell me I need not answer, for when you asked the question you must have felt it was not in my power."

Maude coloured angrily, and said,

"I only mean that sometimes those very good, busy ladies receive warning, or something to that effect; or else it seems so strange that both Miss Maxwell and my brother should have been led to the place with one accord!"

Mr. Beaumont looked up with a flush on his countenance, and said, half scornfully,

"I cannot think what possesses you, Maude! I have told you a dozen times that the light and the crowd running together attracted me. You do not suppose I had received any warning that Mr. Penrose's property was likely to be in danger on such a night?"

"No; not from the perpetrators of the deed, of course."

"From *whom*, then, may I ask?" said her brother, with indignant emphasis.

"Oh! don't talk about it, please, any more," said Gwendoline, half in tears; then adding aside to Louis, "I cannot think what has come to us all, when we used to be so happy together."

"And so we may be still, Gwen, dear," answered Louis, "if you and Maude do not

get foolish ideas into your heads, and talk nonsense. Come, Gwen, I want you to show me those new ferns that came this morning, like a kind, good little sister as you are!"

Alas! alas! those few last words marred all the beginning of Louis's kind speech to his cousin, but she got up to do as he told her, though with none of the usual alacrity. Poor girl, it was a hard lesson she was to have taught her; and she knew not, in those early days, how to learn it.

Maude had not heard what had passed, but as she saw the two walk together into the conservatory, her brow relaxed, and a softer expression came across her face. John Penrose saw and understood something of it; and then he said,

"I suppose it was quite by accident that I was indebted to the services of two kind friends at the same time? You do not

know, perhaps, how kindly Mrs. and Miss Maxwell have exerted themselves amongst the families of my workmen since they have been living in Castleford ; but if you were aware of it, you would understand Miss Maxwell's feeling in going amongst them at that time."

"No, indeed," said Maude, very frigidly ; "I was not aware of Miss Maxwell's good deeds and kind offices on your behalf ; but, of course, you have sufficient reason to feel grateful for such peculiar interest in all your people."

"You forget, Miss Beaumont, that she is also somewhat concerned in the interests of the Brewery and the working people there."

"I can hardly be accused of forgetting what I have never heard," replied Maude coldly.

"I should not have troubled you with matters of such small importance to your-

self, if you had not put the question."

"I see," answered Maude, with one of her sunny smiles, that brought Mr. Penrose metaphorically to her feet again. "As usual, all the blame rests with me; and if I am inquisitive above measure, I must be content with such answers as I get, and you choose to give, Mr. Penrose. Well, I confess I did not know before that the Brewery was a joint affair; but that being the case, I will ask no more questions."

"But you will perhaps excuse my telling you how it is that Miss Maxwell is slightly concerned as well as I myself am in a much more considerable way. It is that her aunt, Mrs. Penrose, left her a certain portion settled on the property, whilst I derive the greater share of the benefit from my uncle, Mr. Penrose, in this unfortunate brewery business."

“Not unfortunate, I hope, Mr. Penrose,” replied Maude, demurely. “This fire was certainly an unpleasant *contretemps*, but I sincerely hope you will live long enough to repair it all.”

“I really do not see that whether I do, or not, is of much consequence to anyone,” replied Mr. Penrose moodily, thinking that Maude Beaumont was the most provoking and the most charming creature that ever drew breath.

Maude perceived she was recovering her usual hold on his imagination (it could hardly be termed his affection), so she went on—

“You are very ungrateful, Mr. Penrose, when people venture their lives in your service, to say no one cares for you.”

“If you mean your brother, Miss Beaumont, what he did was in the cause of hu-

manity; and as for my own individual share in being concerned in his unlucky accident, I can truly say I would rather have been a loser to any extent than that such a casualty should have occurred. Pray believe me, it has been no cause of rejoicing to me."

Maude Beaumont glanced up in his face with a mischievous smile, and said,

"Now that is going a great deal too far the other way, Mr. Penrose. You don't suppose I grudge my brother a sprained arm, if it has been the means of such extensive good to yourself and others. I suppose we must include Miss Maxwell amongst the benefited parties—possibly Louis was also acquainted with the interesting fact."


As Miss Beaumont said this, Mr. Penrose's eye fell on the pair who were still engaged in the conservatory, ostensibly

examining some new specimens of ferns just placed there, but talking apparently of other matters, as their eyes often wandered from the plants, their thoughts no doubt tending in different directions. As John looked at the cousins, he observed with a smile,

“I think, Miss Beaumont, your brother has sufficient objects of interest at home to care much to seek others elsewhere.”

Maude followed the direction of Mr. Penrose's gaze, and understood the inference he drew from the scene at a little distance ; but she was not quite so much impressed by what she saw as he was, and only observed in reply,

“Most men like novelty. There is a great sameness in a home-party, so it is but natural that Louis should be interested in something a little different from what he sees



every day; and thus I suppose it came to pass that he followed Miss Maxwell into the cottages to gain some fresh experiences, for I imagine everyone saw them making their expedition together?"

And then she directed an inquiring look into Mr. Penrose's face. He made a little impatient gesture, and said,

"I really know nothing of the antecedents of the case."

"And care less, I suppose?" replied Maude, with another questioning glance.

"No. Why should I?"

"Well, you see a good deal of this Miss Maxwell, don't you?"

At this query John Penrose hesitated for a moment, for he neither wished Maude to think there was any particular intimacy between him and Ruth, nor did he care to disown the friendly terms on which they

stood with each other. Maude's quick eye discerned the slight embarrassment, and placing it to a wrong account, believed that there was actually something of an attachment between them, and this persuasion made her feel hot and angry ; but she only laughed and said something about being "very suitable." What was suitable no one cared to know or inquire. Then, as an uncomfortable silence ensued, Miss Beaumont observed, in rather a patronizing way,

"You know we all really owe a debt of gratitude to Miss Maxwell for the service she rendered our dear cousin ; so no doubt Louis takes every opportunity of paying his share of it, and under certain circumstances both Gwen and I shall have the utmost satisfaction in discharging, as far as may be possible, our part of the obligation."

Mr. Penrose said nothing in acknowledgment, for he felt it did not concern him. He only thought Maude was less charming than usual, and he quite yearned for one of her bright looks and sallies, but none came : so he rose and took his leave.

CHAPTER VI.

THE evening of that same day, the two girls were alone at Harewood Park, for Mrs. Nelson happened to be absent, and there were no visitors. Maude had seated herself listlessly by the fireside ; and then it was that Gwendoline drew a stool near, and came and sat by her cousin, and with a weary sigh laid her head upon her lap.

“What is it, dear?” asked Maude, with a tender softening of countenance and voice which she seldom showed to anyone but her young cousin.

“I can hardly explain it, Maude dear ;

but I have such a presentiment of coming sorrow—such a weight at my heart.”

“Then you are not well, dear; and I shall send to Mr. Dalton to see you when he next comes to look after Louis’s arm.”

“Don’t, dear—he will do me no good. What do you think, speaking of Louis, that we were talking about in the conservatory this morning, whilst Mr. Penrose was here?”

“Something pleasant, I hope, Gwen; you both seemed much engrossed by your subject, whatever it might have been.”

“You will never guess, Maude.”

“Then tell me at once.”

“Well, he—Louis—talked about home—our old home, you know, where we were all so happy together, when *they* were both living.”

Then Gwendoline stopped and shed a

few tears to the memory of the father and mother she had lost, whilst Maude silently caressed her, and waited till she should speak again. At last she continued—

“And Louis talked so strangely; I could hardly understand him. It was about me and my duties as a large landed proprietor, and my looking after tenants, and all such things, Maude.”

“Well, dear, there is nothing so strange or terrible in that, surely. He is your guardian as well as cousin, and it is quite right he should set before you your responsibilities as a great heiress.”

“And you too, Maude! Perhaps, then, you will agree with him that it is my duty to go and live on my own property amongst them all?”

“Well, perhaps it may, and it certainly must be right occasionally to do so.”

“What, alone, Maude!—for that I felt was what he was aiming at—he wants to send me away, Maude—he is tired of my being here!” And then the poor girl hid her face on her folded arms on her cousin’s lap, and cried bitterly.

Maude felt half frightened, and very angry with her brother for having said anything to their gentle cousin that could bear such a construction as she put on it. Still she never thought for a moment but that Gwendoline’s sensitive nature had taken some false alarm, and yet was it possible that he might be meditating that which would grieve and wound that affectionate heart above all bearing? So Maude sat silently stroking the beautiful hair which rested on her lap, but her hands trembled, and there were unusual lines of trouble on her brow. At last Gwendoline, who, childlike, preferred

to talk of her trouble (for Maude only gave utterance to an indignant disclaimer, but said no more,) went on—

“Yes, Maude, he evidently intended me to feel that my future is not his future ; that in all that large property, which I only valued on his account, as making me more worthy of him, he has no concern beyond what he is compelled to take as my guardian. I should not say all this to you, Maude, but that we have so often talked together of that future which seemed so fixed.”

“Yes, dear, no doubt ; and so it must be ; and *we* know it. But do not you see and feel,” said Maude, more cheerily, and with an assumption of assurance, “that it would not do for Louis, or for any man, however intimate, to presume upon the future, until he has been actually accepted by the girl he hopes to win ?”

Gwendoline was silent, but pressed her cousin's hand, as if in acknowledgment of the comfort she was giving; and Maude proceeded—

“Now, you see, dearest, Louis has not yet spoken to you on that subject, and situated as we all are here together, he is quite right. You are a great heiress, and he feels you ought to consider yourself at liberty to make your own selection, now you are really in the world, and can see others besides himself. He would think it dishonourable to try to appropriate you before you have had any power of choice; so he talks to you, dear, about your affairs as still in your own power, and not as if he was likely, or sure, to be the eventual manager of your property when no longer your guardian.”

Gwendoline raised her tearful face, and

brushing away the drops that hung on her long lashes, lifted her wistful eyes to her cousin's face, and whispered,

"Thank you, Maude, for telling me all you think; but it seemed so new to me, and his manner and way of speaking, I can hardly explain the impression it gave; but something, as if he wished me to feel that it was a—only a *brother's* interest he takes in me, and all that belongs to me. And then, dear, he said it would be right for me to visit the poor old home, and stay for a certain time; and that he and you would take me down there after Christmas. And then he said nothing about my coming back to you, and with you. Oh! Maude, I shall die if you and Louis take me to that old castle, and leave me there!"

A fresh burst of tears closed this doleful speech, and then Maude tried her hand

again at comforting, and assured the weeping girl that nothing should ever separate her from her cousin, till they both found their own homes elsewhere—"At least," said Maude, "till she herself did. Besides," continued Maude, "I feel sure, dearest, you have totally misunderstood Louis. I know he has said before that you ought to go amongst your own people, and visit your own place occasionally—it is no new idea on his part; but to think of our leaving you there, and returning here without you, Gwen, is too preposterous. Come, do cheer up, darling, and think and say no more about it!"

"Well, I will say no more—at present, at least," replied Gwendoline, rather comforted.

Then Maude, to turn the subject, said,

"I made a discovery this morning, Gwen,

whilst Mr. Penrose was here, during that unlucky talk of yours' and Louis."

"Oh! I suppose he told you he admired you? I have seen that long ago; but, of course, you would never give him any encouragement?"

Here Gwendoline raised her head again, and looked inquiringly in her cousin's face, as if she did not feel quite so sure as her words implied. Maude smiled, and shook her head.

"Wrong, my dear; he may have liked me a little now and then in times past, and I daresay he did. You know I always tell the truth, Gwen."

"Of course you do—*Le bon sang ne peut pas mentir*," returned the little heiress, somewhat proudly, adding—"But I hope Mr. Penrose knows he *can* have no chance—for let him be ever so nice, there is that hor-

rible Brewery ; besides, he must see that Sir Digby Ferrers is devoted to you, and that he can have but little chance beside him."

"There I can't quite agree with you, cousin mine," answered Maude. "However, it was no question of *my* liking Mr. Penrose, but I found out that he and that Miss Maxwell are great friends, and constantly together."

When Maude said these words rather indifferently, the effect on Gwendoline was magical ; she raised herself, and sat upright ; a fresh light came into her sweet, tearful face. She eagerly scanned her cousin's face, to see if she meant what she said, then whispered—

"Do you really believe, Maude, that Mr. Penrose is engaged to Miss Maxwell ?"

"Something very like it, I suspect," an-


swered Maude, with a little twinge at her heart, which she proudly ignored.

“What did you say to it?” asked Gwendoline.

“Oh! I hardly know—it was no concern of mine. I said it was very suitable, or something to that effect.”

“She is a nice girl,” observed Gwendoline; adding musingly, “and very handsome, no doubt. I like her exceedingly, and feel very grateful to her, no doubt, and I am sure, when we first knew her, I thought her quite charming; but I fear, if everything we hear is true, she is a great flirt.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Maude, decidedly. “Though we all know that *on dit* is occasionally a great story-teller, yet I have seen enough myself to observe that Miss Maxwell, with all her goodness and amiability, and so on, is a monstrous flirt at heart.”



“You are thinking, Maude, of what we have heard about her and Louis, and being seen so busy at the fire together?”

Maude in reply nodded her head; and then, after a pause, said,

“Of late I have taken to observe her myself, but have not had much opportunity, as she declines coming to our house, and her mother refuses to see any company at hers. Do you know, Gwen, I sometimes think there is some mystery about this mother of hers?”

“Do you?” replied Gwendoline, indifferently; adding, “I have been told she is a great invalid—something of heart-complaint, I think Lady Cunliffe said—so she has to keep very quiet, and avoid all excitement; besides, it is not so very long since her husband died, and she has lost all her children too, so, poor thing, there is quite

enough to account for her not wishing to see people, and go to strange houses."

"Yes, so it seems, and I should never have thought more about it, if it had not been that, when I asked some questions both of Lady Cunliffe and of Mr. Penrose respecting this lady, they both looked embarrassed, and turned the subject as quickly as they could."

"It might have been all your own fancy, Maude, for they showed no embarrassment that I can remember in speaking to me about her, and I am sure I never saw a daughter more devoted to a mother than that Miss Maxwell is, though I fear she is such a flirt. However, if she is really engaged to Mr. Penrose, it is to be hoped she will let other people alone."

Whilst these two young ladies were thus settling their own and their neighbours'

affairs, Mr. Beaumont, in the room below, with his legs stretched out in front of the fire, and a cigar between his lips, was pondering in his own mind how soon he should be able to make his appearance, to offer inquiries at Mrs. Maxwell's house. He thought with joy that the ice was now broken, and the barrier passed that had shut him out from her house; he fully hoped now that, whenever he called there, he should find an "open sesame." And then the thought would obtrude, what was to be the end of it all? Was it true—as his sister Maude not long ago had told him—that all the world believed him to be engaged to his cousin, Miss Powys? Could it really be so? And did Gwendoline herself participate in that belief? In fact, did she regard him in such a manner as to make the supposition agreeable to her? It was rather a serious considera-

tion. For not for worlds would he pain that gentle, trusting heart. But he had, till the last year, looked upon Gwendoline as only a child, a very dear child, committed to his sacred charge by those who had been everything in the world to him, and who, he candidly believed, would have rejoiced in such a consummation of his guardianship. He was quite sure Gwendoline loved him, but he flattered himself it was in such a childlike fashion that it was quite in his own power to turn that sentiment either to the tender devotion of a wife, or to leave it all undeveloped in its present state of sweet sisterly affection.

It was rather presumptuous of Mr. Beaumont thus to take upon himself the destiny of that pure heart, and to flatter himself he could retain or restrain its higher, deeper feelings according to his own will ; but thus

it was, since a fresh light had come into his own life, that he had been aiming at establishing new and sisterly relations between himself and Gwendoline.

It was rather up-hill work. He could not be blind to the fact that his cousin's heart had already taken a bias of its own; nor was he entirely without self-reproach that there had, almost unconsciously, been some leaning of his own in the same direction, and that, had he never met Ruth Maxwell, and fallen deeply, irretrievably in love with her, he might, ere long, have drifted into an engagement with his cousin, as a matter of course, and because all the world expected it.

"Anything better than such a dull, loveless marriage!" thought he, as he puffed out his conclusions at intervals. "Dear Gwen deserves better of me; but we are much too

nearly related to marry ; far better for each of us to seek and make entirely new connections. By the way, I wonder if ‘ Ruth ’ —he always thought of her by that name— “ has any relations except that old Lady Cunliffe? I suppose she is a great-aunt, or something of that kind ! ” —Mr. Beaumont had rather vague ideas on the intricacies of relationship.—“ I am sure that nice woman I saw the other night is Ruth’s own mother. Who ever heard of a step-mother being in such a position with her husband’s daughter? I don’t like the name. Yet I have no doubt it is as common amongst Scotch people as Smith is amongst us English. The sooner Ruth changes it the better. How lovely she looked by starlight the other night, and how calm in the hour of danger ! I have not much faith in women’s being angels, but from my heart I believe *her* to be one !

And then—and then—I do think she does care one little bit—for me. She is quite above all paltry disguise, and I must ere long ask her the question.”

But then came another, and an awkward pause, whilst he knocked the ashes off his cigar, and turned the situation over in his own mind. The truth was, however he might disguise it to himself, he was afraid of what Maude might *say*, and also of what Gwendoline might *feel*, when they became acquainted with his feelings and intentions.

The idea had already occurred to him that it would be as well to separate himself, as gently as he could, for a time from his cousin. That was difficult, for if he went away, not only did he leave her a resident at his own house, and virtually part of his household as much in his absence as if he were present; besides, he must return

sooner or later, and then everything would remain on the same footing—the one great paramount objection being that he should absent himself also from Ruth, and that just at the most critical position of affairs in regard to her. So his own absence, except for a very brief time, was not to be thought of. He had already intimated to Gwendoline the necessity of visiting her own place; and now Louis Beaumont felt the best and easiest plan for all was to go down into Wales after Christmas, which was not far distant, and after settling his cousin with Maude and Mrs. Nelson as her companions, to return home in bachelor ease and freedom, and feel free to follow his own devices, without the dread either of sisterly interference or cousinly comment, or perhaps blame from both.

Louis Beaumont kept a good deal in his

own apartments after he had formed this plan ; but as Christmas approached, he filled his house more than usually full of guests—not without a latent hope that, amongst some of the eligible young men he took care to invite, some one might be found who would endeavour to make himself agreeable to the beautiful young heiress. Unfortunately for his hope, poor Gwendoline's confidence in her cousin's affection had begun to revive. Louis was hardly aware that in his anxiety to save her pain, and smooth the road for his intended desertion, he was more kind and attentive than ever in the presence of his guests. And from the same feeling, not to vex either his sister or herself, he quite gave up going anywhere to seek Ruth. He knew the time was fast approaching when he could do so without restraint ; and with the feeling he had had for her, it was easier

to abstain entirely than to see her only casually and at rare intervals. So, from the time just mentioned up to the day of their journey into Wales, he went no more into Castleford.

Mr. Beaumont said little or nothing about his intention of leaving his sister and Gwendoline as soon as he had seen them settled in Wales, and had looked a little into Gwendoline's affairs in his capacity of guardian. It was a question that did not trouble either of them at that time; and when they left home it was in the full hope and belief that in the course of a few weeks they should all return there together.

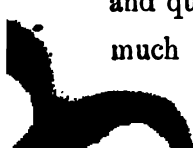
CHAPTER VII.

BEFORE that departure actually took place, John Penrose found himself sorely troubled in various ways. If there was one especial thing he was proud of (and with an honest, laudable pride) it was of the relations that had hitherto subsisted between himself and his workmen. He had, as it were, been brought up amongst them, he knew them all personally, and interested himself in their individual welfare, and in the comfort and well-being of their families also.

Mr. Penrose was, to a certain extent, a man of pleasure, but he was no less also a

man of business. He came of a race that had been devoted to mercantile pursuits for many generations, and he had much of the family character about him. Still he was a great improvement on those who had gone before him, and devoted their lives to the process of money-making.

John Penrose was a gentleman of refined mind and liberal ideas. His education and training had been very superior, even to the uncle who preceded him, and from whom he inherited his wealth. But he was of far too independent a turn of mind to despise the means by which it had been acquired. He was also keenly alive to the fact that he was much indebted to his riches for the place he had achieved in society; although, from his personal merits and qualifications also, it deserved to be so much superior to that of his predecessor;



Mr. Penrose, therefore, took an honest pride both in his Bank and his Brewery; but especially in the latter, for he was but a partner in the first. The Brewery was his own affair, and he alone was interested in the large concern, and all those who were employed in it. It was, therefore, a grievous blow to him when, after some weeks of searching investigation, the crime of setting fire to the new Brewery buildings was traced home to four of his own workmen.

No doubt there are black sheep in every flock, and discontented people amongst those who have had the greatest benefits conferred upon them; but Mr. Penrose had been slow to learn the lesson, and it was one that not only made him indignant, but acted very painfully on his mind in various ways. He had so entirely expected to find that the crime had originated amongst

the lower and worst-disposed part of the population of Castleford. As to the motives of the real criminals, it would be difficult to assign any that might offer the shadow even of a reason or excuse; though, no doubt, there had been jealousies and heart-burnings even in that little community which led to the act, and all its disastrous consequences. The loss, as has been said, was great, but by no means ruinous to so wealthy a man as Mr. Penrose. It was, however, the cause of a considerable change in his plans and intentions at that time.

It was as the pebble dropped in the centre of the stream, which, small in itself, is the cause of innumerable ripples and discomposure in the surrounding circles. The first great alteration caused in Mr. Penrose's proceedings was the breaking off of a treaty in which he was already engaged,

as to becoming the purchaser of an estate in the neighbourhood, which was then in the market. It was on that account he had gone to London, and he had, unfortunately, postponed his insurance business, that he might see after both at the same time. One day later, and all would have been concluded—the large purchase and the extensive insurance concern. So far, in his prudent heart, John Penrose rejoiced that, as the latter had been left undone, the former had not been concluded. And yet there was a very deep *arrière pensée* in the contemplation of the intended purchase. It was a beautiful place and property, and he had heard Maude Beaumont speak admiringly of it. He felt he could never have asked her to become the wife of the Brewer of Castleford, living in its dingy streets, however spacious the mansion he might have

prepared for her occupation there. But, as the owner of "Waterfells Hall," with all the prestige of his wealth and many other advantages, might he not have presumed so far? It needs little to be said, therefore, to make it appear that there were many bitter ingredients in the cup prepared by the incendiaries of Castleford for their late kind and liberal master.

No one in that place knew of Mr. Penrose's intended purchase; he had kept his views, with all that hinged upon them, carefully to himself. He was thankful that he had done so, and so escaped all the comments and condolences that might have arisen on the failure of his plans. Not even Maude herself had the least idea how nearly the proposal had been made which would have given her the option of becoming the mistress of Waterfells; nor how much

bitter disappointment had been concealed on the occasion of Mr. Penrose's first visit after his misfortunes, and when she had given him credit for being engaged, or "almost so," to Miss Maxwell. Maude felt well disposed to treat him somewhat superciliously after she had made, as she supposed, that discovery; and the next time John Penrose went to Harewood (to meet a large dinner-party), he found himself in no pleasant position with the young lady of the house. There was no mistaking the fact that he had lost ground in her favour; still, he never suspected the real cause, but foolishly fancied that the change might have something to do with the idea that his fortune and position were seriously affected by his late misfortune.

"Could," he thought, "Miss Beaumont be so mercenary as to like him less because

of his pecuniary losses?" No doubt they were reported much larger than the reality; and few people knew how well he was prepared to meet the casualty. Still the rumour gained ground that Mr. Penrose had been a terrible sufferer from the late fire; and the intense vexation and annoyance he experienced from other causes (and which he could not entirely conceal) was placed to the account of his loss of property.

It was a relief to the young man's harassed mind to turn to the calm, quiet friendship of the Maxwells; and he found himself constantly haunting their house, where he was sure of meeting both sympathy and kindly counsel in all that pertained to his dealings with his workpeople, especially at that time. It had been subject of self-congratulation, on the part of Mr. Penrose, that, since Mrs. Maxwell and her step-daughter had come to live in Castleford, he had

secured their interest amongst the female part of his dependents. It was woman's work, and could be done by none other; though he had never cared before to enlist the sympathies of any of the surrounding ladies, till Ruth and her mother came to the rescue. Still, whilst occupied with these concerns, there was ever uppermost in his thoughts that everything was altered as regarded his relations with Maude Beaumont. He plainly saw that she was changed towards him in various ways—she no longer alternately encouraged and repressed his attentions; there were no longer any tell-tale glances in his direction, and he was conscious of a dull aching pain at his heart as he took note of all these things, and knew not the cause.

His last visit to Harewood was made a day or two before the family left the place. He had received no formal intimation of

their intended departure. Miss Powys had told him, a short time before, that they were going to stay at her old home soon after Christmas, but no particular day was named ; and at that time Mr. Beaumont was too much occupied in various ways to remember that John Penrose might feel an especial interest in their movements, so when the news reached him it was through a third person.

“ I daresay I shall never see her again as Maude Beaumont,” thought he, gloomily, as he recalled certain observations he had made when they last met ; and he remembered her coldness to himself was strongly contrasted with her amiable toleration of Sir Digby Ferrers’ evident attentions. “ Well, never mind, I must see her once more, and say good-bye.” So, putting a good face on his uncomfortable sensations,

John Penrose went to pay his farewell visit.

The guests who had been staying there were gone, and when he was shown into the ladies' morning-room, it looked rather dreary, divested of its litter of books and work. Maude and Gwendoline were, however, still to be found in their usual places there; and he was not sorry to see Mrs. Nelson's unoccupied. She was busy superintending the packing going on upstairs.

"I heard you were going away to-morrow, so I came to wish you good-bye—but I fear I may be in your way."

"Oh! not at all," said Maude, civilly, but with some restraint; whilst Gwendoline added kindly,

"We should have been sorry to have gone away without saying good-bye, Mr. Penrose. But I thought you knew all about our movements?"

"Indeed, no—you spoke of leaving home this Winter, but it was only hearing from Mr. Dalton this morning that you were going so soon, made me come at once, for fear I might not see you."

"You are very good," said Maude, in the same constrained tone, "but really, for my own part, I never see much satisfaction in saying good-bye."

"No," returned he, with a wistful look—"it is only choosing between two evils—that of saying the unpleasant words, or letting your friends go away without seeing them."

To this evident truism no answer was returned, and a pause ensued, which was relieved at last by Gwendoline remarking, as if she had been taxing her imagination for something to say,

"So you heard of our day of departure,

Mr. Penrose—which, by-the-by, is the day after to-morrow—from Mr. Dalton? I hope you are not a patient of his?”

“Oh! no—I met him at Mrs. Maxwell’s, this morning.”

The two girls here interchanged a hasty glance, which their visitor was too pre-occupied to notice; and Maude, drawing herself up, observed, with dignified condescension,

“I hope Miss Maxwell is not ill.”

“Not ill, I hope,” answered he, all unsuspectingly; “but she has a bad cold, and her mother was anxious to send for our friend.”

“Our friend!” thought Maude, “confirmation strong,” but she made another effort, and said, with the same freezing civility,

“I hope his report was satisfactory to—to Mrs. Maxwell and yourself?”

“ I did not hear—I was in haste to come here, fearing I might miss you ; but I intend calling there, on my way back, to inquire.”

The two girls then murmured amiable wishes that “ he might find the invalid better ;” which John Penrose took as evidence of their kindly interest in so interesting a person as Ruth Maxwell ; whilst Maude and her cousin, with different degrees of feeling about the matter, made sure that his engagement was now a settled thing, but both thinking, as he did not say more about it, they could not offer their good wishes. Maude felt she had done it once—or, rather, had intimated them—and it was now his turn to speak ; whilst Gwendoline, in the fulness of her satisfaction at the turn things had taken, was satisfied to rest quietly in her comfortable persuasion.

Then Mr. Penrose plunged recklessly into

various topics of conversation, all far away from the subject that lay so heavy at his heart, till Maude again approached another, that was in its way almost as painful.

“So I hear, Mr. Penrose, you have succeeded in finding out the people who set fire to your buildings?”

“Yes. It seems the crime is brought home to those I should least have suspected.”

“But it is a good thing that the guilty ones are detected, and will be punished, as they deserve. You must be glad of that.”

“At all events, I suppose I ought to be; but I fear there are a good many innocent people who will suffer on the occasion also—I mean the men’s wives and families.”

“Ah! I hear that positively Miss Maxwell was sitting in one of their cottages all the time the man was absent on his dreadful

errand. Why, he might have burnt all the cottages, as well as the other buildings."

"Yes; no doubt there was great danger of that; and we have to thank your brother for saving us from that addition to the calamity; but, altogether, it is a most deplorable event, far beyond what any amount of loss could cause. Indeed," continued Mr. Penrose, speaking earnestly, and rather rapidly, "I would rather have been a loser to double the amount, to have had the satisfaction of knowing that the disaster was accidental, or arising from any degree of negligence on the part of those unhappy men."

Maude looked up for a moment, with one bright, flashing look of approbation that, had it been seen, would have healed many wounds, but, unhappily, it passed unobserved; and Miss Beaumont, recovering from her

momentary fit of softening, was all herself again, and remarked, in a cold tone,

“But, Mr. Penrose, do you know people say—at least, some people say—that it is all your own fault?”

“My fault!” exclaimed John Penrose, considerably astonished, and not a little annoyed. “Excuse my repeating your words, Miss Beaumont, but I do not see how you can bring the fault home to my door. I think the misfortune is enough!”

“No doubt,” repeated the lady, calmly. “And the mistake also.”

Mr. Penrose looked up, rather bewildered, as well as slightly indignant, and the latter feeling was not decreased as Gwendoline observed, with a little laugh,

“I don’t agree with them at all, Mr. Penrose, but some people here were talking about it—I mean the fire, and the wretches

who caused it—the other day, and Sir Digby Ferrers said it was all your own fault; not really blaming you, you know, but saying you were so indulgent, and had such high notions about people's rights, and education and learning for the million, and so on, that the end of it was everybody read everything, and everybody could not understand what they read, and they took the law, as well as the literature, into their own hands; and some of these half-knowing gentry thought it right to burn down your new buildings, because, for some reason of their own, they did not approve of their erection."

"So that is Sir Digby's version of the affair," replied Mr. Penrose, in a tone as frigid as Maude's, but rather more satirical.

"Yes," replied Maude, flushing indignantly. "I suppose everyone has a right

to his own opinion, though it may not be strictly in accordance with more popular ones."

"It seems, however," replied Mr. Penrose, in the same tone, "that popular opinions are becoming rather too latitudinarian in their tendency—if one may judge by painful experience."

"I meant the opinion only of educated people—those who are capable of forming their own judgment, not that of a set of rabble workmen!" retorted Maude, rather more angry than the occasion demanded.

"Pardon me," replied Mr. Penrose. "I understand. You alluded to Sir Digby Ferrers's opinion, but it seems, with all due deference to his discernment, rather—a—a selfish policy to shut up the door of knowledge to all except those who are privileged by right of rank to enter. I cannot help

thinking that anyone of the 'rabble' has as much right to cultivate his intellect, and use it when opportunity offers. All I say is, let it be done thoroughly ; it is the *little* knowledge that is dangerous."

"And yet you would have everyone have some of that *little*, if he cannot get more, Mr. Penrose?" asked Gwendoline.

"Certainly give them a chance. The more they really know, the more they will feel how little it is, and distrust their own judgment. I should be glad that everyone had at least the opportunity of learning placed before him, as, indeed, it is likely to be in these days. Some will profit by it, and others will never make any advance in their acquirements. As to those ill-fated men of whom we were speaking, it is a notorious fact that they were noisy, disputatious fellows, who talked much, and knew very little."

“And yet you trusted them?” said Gwendoline.

“I did not distrust them, because there arose no cause for so doing. I never entertained the slightest apprehension of such a calamity as has occurred; and, of course, I never looked for perfection even amongst my own workmen. And now,” said Mr. Penrose, taking up his hat, “I am sure you have had enough of these unpleasant doings, and it only remains for me to wish you all that is most agreeable where you are going; but I do hope, Miss Powys, you will not vote against education in general on your extensive property.”

Gwendoline laughed and said,

“No; Sir Digby has failed to convert me—it is Maude who believes in him.”

With that pleasant parting speech ringing in his ears, John Penrose took his leave.

CHAPTER VIII.

“SO everybody is gone away,” remarked Lady Cunliffe, one Winter morning, disconsolately, as she stirred the fire, rather an exertion on her part.

“Who is gone?” asked Miss Wheeler; then, after a little pause of consideration, she continued—“The Beaumonts and Miss Powys have been talking about it some time, so I suppose they may be gone at last; but I did not know anyone else was going away. Do you mean the Maxwells?”

“No—it is Mr. Penrose. I sent him a note this morning, asking him to dine here next week, and here is his answer.”

Miss Wheeler took it, looked at it indifferently, and then, returning it, said,

“Yes, I suppose he is gone by this time ; but really he is no great loss in a party, for he has been quite changed since that unlucky fire, and so engrossed by his losses and misfortunes that he has hardly a word to say. It is really very stupid of him. As if no one ever had anything go wrong with him except himself.”

“Yes, it is much better to take things coolly, of course, if you can,” replied the widow, settling herself in a cozy corner of the sofa, and pulling out something that did duty as work, but never proceeded beyond a certain point, as it remained much in the same state as when it was supposed to be commenced.

“We have hardly seen Miss Maxwell since the day of the fire,” said Sophy,

taking upon herself the burden of conversation for the entertainment of her patroness.

"No," replied that lady; "poor Ruth has had her time pretty well taken up since then. She has been quite a prisoner. First, her mother was very ill—had some sort of nervous attack the day after the fire; I suppose she got frightened at Ruth's being out that evening; and then lately she has had a bad cold herself."

"Yes," replied Miss Wheeler, pulling her needle through her work with rather a snappish determination; "but the two illnesses you mention are not all the cause, I think, for I heard of Miss Maxwell's being about in Castleford very frequently, and it seems she has busied herself very energetically about the families of those horrid men who caused all the trouble."

"Yes, I know Ruth never spares herself,

if she can give help or comfort to anyone," replied her aunt.

Miss Wheeler paused for a minute, as if reflecting; then said, indifferently,

"I think Mr. Penrose must be flattered with the interest your niece takes in his affairs."

"I don't suppose he thinks much about it—in the way you mean, Sophy," answered Lady Cunliffe.

"Perhaps not; he is rather too much taken up with Miss Beaumont at present, but, from what I hear, he has little or no chance there, and many a heart is caught on the rebound, you know," said Sophy, in her usual apathetic tone, which was wont occasionally to cover so much.

Lady Cunliffe left the remark unanswered, till she observed—

"My own opinion is that the poor man

has not much heart for love or matrimony just now; he seemed quite cut up by all that has happened, and when I last saw him he said the most trying part of it all was the appeals made to him by the men's families to get them off severe punishment, and their doleful histories of the ruin and desolation that must come on them and their children. Poor souls, it *is* very sad, both for them and for Mr. Penrose too, and I have not the least doubt he is gone away, and will keep away, till the trial and everything is over."

"So he leaves poor Miss Maxwell to fight his battle, and console the poor people as best she may in his absence," observed the companion, in reply.

"I am sure Ruth likes to be useful, and she never grudges her trouble when she can do good," again replied her aunt, on her behalf.

The two ladies sat silent for some time, each following the current of her thoughts, which, no doubt, ran in very diverse directions, till Miss Wheeler observed, as if casually,

“So Mr. Beaumont is gone, and, I suppose, has said nothing either to you or to Miss Maxwell?”

Lady Cunliffe opened her round eyes very wide at this observation, and made answer,

“Why, he was not likely to speak to *me*, unless, indeed, he might have heard anything about Mrs. Maxwell—and then I don’t see what I should have to do with the business, unless he wants to marry Ruth, as you seem to suppose.”

“Well, there did seem a little something between them the last time we saw them together, and I thought she was expecting him all the time she was here—and people

said they went to the fire together ; but it might all have been a mistake, as nothing seems to have come of it, and we all know there is a sort of family compact for him to marry that little cousin of his."

"I don't believe a word of it," replied the widow, with unusual vivacity. "I am pretty sure he liked Ruth, and I don't think she disliked him ; and as Mr. Beaumont is his own master, what should prevent their making a match of it—all in due time?"

To this query the companion made no reply, but smiled quietly to herself, and went on with her work.

"Well, Sophy, what objection have you got in your head now?"

"Only that Mr. Beaumont *may* not be aware that your niece is the daughter of the man it seems he disowned his own mother for marrying. I do not say that he

does *not* know it, for really my sources of information are extremely limited ; but, if the case is so, he may naturally fancy (I know it is not so) that he has been made the subject of a sort of family conspiracy, and object to becoming the dupe of such a concealment."

"Really, Sophy, you see things in a very unpleasant light," observed the poor lady, disconsolately. "I never thought of such a construction being put on things; and, after all, you know Ruth is not aware of the connection between her step-mother and the Beaumonts."

"That is really very strange!" said the companion, in reply.

And then Lady Cunliffe, finding her good-natured aspirations on her niece's account so ruthlessly crushed, said no more, but called on Miss Wheeler to exert herself

in a different way for her amusement, and then soon became absorbed in the enjoyment of a *matinée musicale*.

It was very true that John Penrose had gone away for a time, to be out of the way of those heart-rending appeals which were being constantly made to him by the families of the accused men, his own stern sense of justice fully acquiescing in the necessity of their severe punishment. He was deeply mortified, too, at the recollection of his parting visit to the Beaumonts. In his secret heart he scrupled not to accuse Maude of cruel coquetry and selfish vanity ; he felt very indignant in contrasting her manner to him that day, with the friendly (perhaps more) interest she had often displayed on former occasions of partings. He little suspected that it was the idea of his own engagement that had caused, in great measure, the

change he so bitterly resented. He therefore determined to leave Castleford for a few weeks, at least—he would not be “left lamenting” there, even in Miss Beaumont’s fickle imagination. He, too, would go away, and if possible enjoy himself—at least, he hoped to be able to do so, after those miserable, misguided workmen of his had been consigned to the fate that they had drawn upon themselves.

Till that was settled his mind could not fail to dwell upon the unpalatable subject. But he would go somewhere for a time, where it should not be forced upon him continually, and where the wretched faces of the weeping wives and children would not meet him at every turn.

So a day or two after his last unsatisfactory interview with Maude Beaumont, he sought another with Ruth Maxwell. She


was still looking paler and more delicate than usual, from her attack of cold, caught in her untiring ministrations amongst the suffering families, whom she had soothed and supported through their bitter trial, with all the untiring sympathy of her generous nature. She had also been much engaged, and her time engrossed, when at home, by her step-mother's attack of illness, following so closely on her chance meeting with her unconscious son as to leave no room to doubt that the cause lay there; though of that Ruth was, of course, entirely unsuspecting.

Thus poor Ruth's whole Winter was passed in anxious attendance on her beloved invalid at home, and in her constant visits to the miserable households already mentioned. Little time had she to think of herself, or her own affairs. Self had, indeed, at all

times but a very small share of Ruth's care and attention, and now it had less chance than ever. Perhaps it was fortunate for Ruth that in this critical stage of her growing love for Louis Beaumont, so stern a check was given to her attachment. She had hardly time to feel vexed or annoyed that he went away without coming to see her—and her mother. She heard from the medical man, Mr. Dalton, who daily attended Mrs. Maxwell, how Mr. Beaumont's injured arm got on. Perhaps it was on that account that Mrs. Maxwell looked so anxiously for his visits during the early part of her own illness, and the days succeeding her son's accident. But the medical report soon declared Mr. Beaumont to be so much better as to leave no room for anxiety on his account, and they ceased to think of him as an invalid.


After his recovery reports reached them of the gaiety going on at the Park, and subsequently of their leaving home, it was said for some months.

Yes, they were actually gone, and no one had come to say "good-bye!" Still, strange and inexplicable as this omission (under existing circumstances) must have appeared to Ruth, she might have found, in the midst of her disquietude, some comfort and support from the circumstance that no week passed without Mrs. Maxwell's receiving tokens of remembrance from the master of Harewood Park. These were continued, and bountiful supplies of game, fruit, and even flowers, sent from that munificent friend; but Ruth, in her humility, placed it all to her mother's account, thinking that Mr. and Miss Beaumont had heard of her mother's illness, and sent these kindly supplies in consequence.




To poor Mrs. Maxwell herself these weekly offerings, which arrived without a word or message, being always left by some servant coming into the town on business of their own, were almost as much a subject of torment as of satisfaction. She delighted herself, on the one hand, with thinking of the generous, thoughtful spirit displayed by her son and daughter; and, on the other, the pleasure was all dashed with the pain of thinking, if they knew it was *she* would she be likely to receive such tokens of kind recollection?

Still the supplies came, and even after the departure of the family continued the same, and yet not a word from either the brother or sister. But Ruth's mind, as has been said, was too much occupied with others and very momentous questions at that time, to have much leisure for weigh-



ing and analyzing the motives and intentions of Louis Beaumont. If ever she found the subject was clamouring at her heart, and would make itself heard, it was soon dismissed with the unspoken thought of trust, which said, "If he cares for me, as he seemed to do that night, he knows where to find me; and if he does not, it is better he should never come again." But the first part of her passing meditation spoke the real nature of her belief in him.

Her friend did not, however, leave her with as little ceremony of parting as her undeclared lover. John Penrose paid many visits to Mrs. and Miss Maxwell. At that time it was with little idea of the construction being put on them that was done by Miss Beaumont, and yet it was seldom he left Ruth's presence without the mental exclamation, "What a wife that woman will



make some man who is lucky enough to win her!" and then he would often institute little comparisons between her and the lady of his most frequent meditations.

It was in his last visit to the Maxwells before his departure, when, as has been said, he found Ruth looking so much the worse for all her exertions both at home and abroad, that his heart turned more tenderly towards her than it had ever yet done before. It might have been the "rebound" that Miss Wheeler had spoken of, when Mr. Penrose's heart felt sore and weary after all the fruitless affection and admiration it had lavished on Miss Beaumont, and restless with its vain, suppressed longing for some return. Then, for the first time, it began to feel there might be peace and happiness found elsewhere.


"I am so glad you are come," said Ruth,

with that open look and bright smile that was felt as sunshine in many a stricken house not far distant.

“You did not think, I hope, that I should take my departure without one word of thanks, and even say good-bye to you and Mrs. Maxwell? Pray say you did not think quite so ill of me.”

“No,” replied Ruth; “I only thought you might be very busy this last day, and have no spare time to bestow upon us. And now, I want to receive your last instructions respecting that wretched man’s wife and family.”

“I give you *carte blanche* to act for me, Miss Maxwell. Do, give, or promise any and everything for me as you think best and most fitting,” exclaimed John Penrose, carried away by a momentary feeling of admiration and tender regard called forth



by that pale face and hopeful smile.

"No, indeed!" said Ruth, quickly, "I decline all such responsibility. And I must beg of you to sit down at this table; and write down all your wishes in respect to every person and thing; and then you may trust to me to see them carried out as far as rests in me, to the best of my power."

"You are right," replied John, his natural prudence and habits of business-like exactness triumphing over his momentary enthusiasm. "I was a fool to talk so, and to wish to throw all the burden upon you."

Then, as Ruth remained silent, he wrote a few lines, whilst she sat near and took up her work to leave him more at liberty; but he soon left off, and observed,


"I am afraid you think me very selfish to run away just at this crisis; but really, you do not know how many things I have

had to annoy and disgust me the last month or two."

"I have no doubt you have," replied Ruth, kindly; "and you must be the best judge of what to do on the occasion, and it may be the wisest and kindest plan to put yourself out of the reach of all fruitless solicitation and vain expectation. You can have but one course open to you, and, such as it is, you are bound to follow it."

"I am glad you give so decided a sanction to my going away," said Mr. Penrose, earnestly; he was thinking in himself what a blessing it would be to a man situated like himself to have just such a woman for his wife—one to whom he could always refer, and on whose judgment he could place implicit reliance.

It was rather a new tone of thought for John Penrose to indulge in, for no man had hitherto had fuller confidence in himself,



and in his own power of judgment on all questions, however intricate. Neither had it occurred to him, whilst indulging certain vain visions in regard to Miss Beaumont, to exalt her into the responsible position in which he had placed Miss Maxwell. His last acts, or rather words, of submission, were received very carelessly by Ruth, who laughed as she replied—

“That would be rather presumptuous of me, I think, to ‘sanction’ anything you did. I only gave my opinion, as you asked it, but I am very sure it was unnecessary; now, perhaps, you will let me see what you have written, and I will endeavour to carry out your wishes.”

Then Mr. Penrose turned to the matters which seemed most interesting to Ruth, and, after a little consultation and a few amendments, the subject was closed and the visit came to an end.

CHAPTER IX.

DEEP down, nestling in the midst of a wild range of Welsh hills, lay "Rhys Castle," the maternal residence of Gwendoline Powys. It was a beautiful and picturesque spot in bright Summer weather; nor was it without its claims to admiration even when viewed through the depressing medium of a wintry fog on a bleak January evening. It seemed very strange to Gwendoline to come home to that large place as its whole and sole mistress; and she was more oppressed than gratified by the demonstrative welcome that awaited her arrival there. She was thankful when she had passed through that

ordeal, and found herself at last quietly standing before the huge fire that burned on the wide baronial-looking hearth in the large drawing-room of the Castle.

She was not quite alone, although Louis had left her, for Maude Beaumont stood near her; and on the other side was Mrs. Nelson, always ready to render any little service that might be required by either of her young charges.

It was a trying moment that coming home, but it might have been a much happier one, in spite of all depressing memories and associations, if poor Gwendoline had but felt her hand in her cousin's, and been able to lean on him for support; much that was then so weary might have been welcome. It seemed to her as if Louis purposely shrank from being included in the ovation that met his young cousin, and would have

been extended to him too gladly had he appeared there with her as her chosen lover and future husband. But after entering the Castle hall, and the gates being at length closed for that night, Louis made some excuse that took him away, leaving the young mistress of the Castle alone with her two friends; nor did they see Louis again till they met at dinner.

It was a large, rambling old place, but had, for the most part, been kept in excellent modern repair by Gwendoline's father and mother; still the two years that had elapsed, during which the best part of the house had been uninhabited, seemed to have done the work of ten, in making all the well-remembered places look strange and unfamiliar in her eyes.

Gwendoline shivered as she crouched over the fire on their return to the cold,

spacious room. Mrs. Nelson, being tired with her journey, had betaken herself to her own room, and the two girls were alone.

"How dreary this looks after bright, cheerful Harewood!" said Gwendoline, in a disconsolate tone. "I can hardly believe it is the same house and place where we lived so happily for so many years with poor papa and mamma."

"I almost wonder, dear, you do not care more for your home on that account," said Maude, who also looked weary and distressed.

"Oh! no," answered the little cousin, "it is the terrible contrast that makes it so miserable coming here—it seems to me the height of wretchedness coming back and finding all outward things in their old places, and knowing that those who made

the happiness of them will return no more
—no more !”

“My dear Gwen,” exclaimed Maude, trying to brighten up and cheer her cousin, “pray do not be so very dismal! What will Louis say when he comes in and finds us both crying?—for really I can’t stand it. You will feel quite different to-morrow, I know; and when we get our affairs a little settled, and lots of pretty things about, you will be as pleased with your old home as you are now discontented.”

“I can’t help it, Maude. If Louis would but have waited till the Summer! But why he should have hurried us all off in the depth of the Winter, I cannot imagine !”

“Well, I suppose—and it is a very prosaic reason—that at this time of the year people have a great many accounts to settle, so I daresay he brought you here,

Gwendoline, to teach you how to pay your Christmas bills."

Gwendoline laughed faintly, and said,

"That is a very far-fetched reason, Maude. There is the same agent—nice old man—and he settles everything for us and the tenants, so that won't do."

"Well, then, you see, it might be your tenantry were getting impatient for a sight of their liege lady, so it is as well you are come to satisfy them."

"I wish they would not be so noisy," said Gwendoline, languidly. Then, after a pause, she asked, "What can Louis be doing this evening? I wonder he does not come to cheer us a little. He has hardly spoken to me since we came in sight of the Castle."

"Don't worry about him, Gwen; he saw you had enough to do to speak to all the host of people collected to do you honour. Come, cheer up—here he is!"

And then Mr. Beaumont came in, and drew his chair between the two girls, who sat on either side of the hearth. It was almost sad to see how the little cousin's eyes brightened when he came near, and how her depression vanished as he talked to her and Maude. They might both have been his sisters, for any difference of manner towards the two. Perhaps, however, he talked most to Gwendoline—was he not her guest? Such an idea of their relative positions had never yet occurred to the young heiress. She certainly at that time considered that both Louis and Maude Beaumont were quite as much at home at Rhys Castle as she could possibly be, and she started when Louis said,

“Now you are come to your own house as its rightful mistress, do not you think, Gwen, you might begin to act as such?—I

mean in respect to the servants here, and in choosing the rooms for your guests, and—”

“And ordering dinner,” put in Maude, laughing.

“But,” said the lady of the Castle, meekly, “I don’t know how—I have never done either in my life.”

“But surely you intend to do so some day?” asked Louis.

Then a bright, happy flush mounted to Gwendoline’s fair brow, as she thought that Louis alluded to the time when she should be the mistress of his house as well as her own, and she answered,

“Yes; perhaps some time or other I may do as I see Maude do—that is, read over the *menu* sent in by the housekeeper every morning. She very seldom alters it.”

“Well, that part of your duties will be very easily settled, Gwen,” returned Louis,

with a smile ; then he went on, in a more serious tone : “ But really, Gwen, there are other things besides appropriating rooms and ordering feasts that will be incumbent on you when living at your own house or castle, and mistress of a large estate.”

“ But I am not come to live here just yet, am I, Louis ? ” asked his cousin, in a piteous voice, and with wistful eyes seeking his.

Mr. Beaumont returned Gwendoline’s look with a quiet, grave smile, and answered,

“ There can be no hurry on that point, but you must remember that next month you will be your own mistress ; you enter your twentieth year, and your father settled you were to be considered of age then.”

“ I had forgotten all that, Louis, and— and I am quite contented with all you settle and think best for me.”

“Well, then, I should say we had better leave matters for a short time as they are. You will have plenty of opportunity of judging during the next month about many things, so you can enjoy your liberty, meanwhile, and rest your responsibilities on me. It will be different after your nineteenth birthday is passed.”

“Oh, no!” began Gwendoline, impetuously; but Maude, detecting a slight look of impatience in her brother’s face, said to Gwendoline,

“I shall now take upon myself another part of your duties, dear, and order you and myself to bed. I am sure we are both tired enough to make such a move very pleasant.”

Gwendoline, in spite of her fatigue, did not altogether approve of Maude’s proposition; but as Louis jumped up with some

alacrity to light their candles for them, she forbore any remonstrance, and meekly took the light that her cousin tendered to her, and did as she was expected. As she and Maude walked up the broad staircase together, she just remarked,

“I had forgotten all about my being of age next birthday; so I suppose that is why Louis thought it best to come here.”

“I suppose so,” replied Maude, wearily; then added—“Now, as we have fathomed that mystery, which need never have been one, pray make yourself happy, dear, and go to sleep upon it as quickly as you can.” And then, with a parting kiss, the cousins went their separate ways.

Gwendoline found that the old house-keeper, Mrs. Jones, had, in her respect for her accession of dignity as lady of the Castle, testified her sense of it by preparing

quite a different set of rooms from those which she had occupied in her girlhood.

"I do not like these half as well," said Miss Powys to her maid, who was a native of the village of Harewood, and looked round the dreary large room in this Welsh castle with considerable awe, and some trepidation.

"You can change back again, surely, ma'am, to-morrow?" questioned Miss Marion, when she understood the nature of her lady's objection.

"I hardly know," replied Gwendoline, with some dawning notions of what might be considered due to her own state and dignity, a subject hitherto all unthought of, till mooted by her guardian-cousin that same evening. "I suppose Mrs. Jones thought those rooms would be too small for me, when we make our home here occasionally—

and so perhaps they are. I did not want so many wardrobes and closets as I shall do now, with such a terrible quantity of dresses. Are they all unpacked, Marion?"

"Oh! no, ma'am. I have had no time hardly to turn round yet, and I am sure I should never have dared stay up here, in these great, dreary, rambling rooms, all by myself; and the first evening, too, of getting here!"

"That is all nonsense, Marion," returned her mistress, with dignity. "Why, am I not going to sleep here all by myself to-night?"

"Indeed, yes, ma'am," returned the lady's-maid, with a slight shrug, which said, as plainly as shoulders could speak, "rather you than I!"

"To be sure," continued Miss Powys, relaxing something of her stately superiority,

"it is different for me, because I was born here, and lived here all my life till the last two years; so I do not mind the dreary look of the rooms so much. Still, having been now so long away, and got so used to the bright, cheerful, sunny rooms at the Park, it does seem a little dull here."


"Ah! ma'am, I am glad you feel it too!" exclaimed the soubrette, rather selfishly, yet ignoring it, in her desire to claim some sympathy and companionship in her uncomfortable feelings.

Gwendoline said no more. Her toilet was completed for the night, her abundant hair duly brushed, and all things in readiness for her repose in that large, funereal-looking bed. There had been no modern alterations in many of the largest sleeping-rooms in the old Castle. Mrs. Powys had always entertained a certain respect for the old state-beds,

which had sheltered so many generations beneath their canopies; and though lighter and smaller ones had been substituted in many of the rooms occupied by the family, the principal apartments retained all their dignified old beds and heavy furniture.

“What a mistake!” thought Gwendoline, as she glanced round the room so respectfully appropriated to her use. “I shall soon take down all this horrid old tapestry, and change the bed, and lighten the aspect of everything about it, if I am to continue to make it my own room; and the dressing-room, too—I daresay it looks just as heavy and gloomy. I wish I had told Marion to sleep there!”

It was too late, however, to wish now, as she felt sure that Marion had sped away quickly to her own less dignified but far more habitable-looking room, and was, no



doubt, already in bed, so it would be cruel to disturb her; besides, she had never asked her where she was going to sleep. So that idea passed quickly away. Gwendoline stirred up the fire, put on more coals, lighted candles in the further part of the room, and tried to fancy she felt very comfortable, and that the room had really quite a cheerful aspect.

“Well, I must go to bed now,” said Gwendoline, at last, to herself, “but I must first just look into the dressing-room. I seem quite a stranger here; but I hardly ever was in these rooms, and never saw them by candle-light before in my life.”

Then Gwendoline, fancying she should feel more comfortable if she looked into the empty room, which opened into her own by double doors, because of the thickness of the walls, opened one cautiously, and then, alter-

ing her mind, returned to the fireside, and sat down again in the place she had just left.

The reason of her speedy retreat was that she fancied she heard a sort of low monotonous chanting on the other side of the further door, and it was to satisfy herself on this particular point that she had returned. "I am really getting shamefully nervous," thought the young lady of the Castle, as she looked round with blanched cheeks and beating heart, whilst she sat and listened, and all seemed quite still. And Gwendoline thought there was abundant cause for every sort of strange noise that might be heard in that old house, so remembering it was the home of her infancy and youth, where she had never met with any cause for alarm, she went again to the door which still stood open, and listening at the other, heard nothing.

However, to make sure, she softly opened the door. As far as she could see from the light which streamed in from her sleeping-room, there was nothing to be seen but a confused mass of boxes and packing-cases heaped about on the floor, and chairs standing in every possible direction. This everyday look was cheering—it took off something of that eerie, uncomfortable feeling with which she had been gradually getting more oppressed.

She breathed more freely as she looked round on the travelling litter taking up so large a share of the adjoining room; but still it felt cold, as the fire had gone out, so she closed the doors of communication, and with a sensation of relief put out some of the superfluous lights and got into bed. She was still restless and excited, though she could hardly tell why; but after many

changes of position and much weariness of mind, she succeeded in going to sleep. Still the uncomfortable sensation pursued her, and troubled her in dreams.

Gwendoline at last dreamed that she, with Louis, was calling at The Bower, that Lady Cunliffe and her companion were there, as usual, and Miss Maxwell also. She thought that Miss Wheeler was called upon to sing, but that, on Louis pressing her, Ruth Maxwell pushed her aside and sat down to the piano; but all her song was a low, monotonous sort of chant or lullaby. Gwendoline fancied herself vexed and worried both with the song and the singer; but still it went droning on. At length she seemed to rouse herself in trying to stop the weariful noise, and in so doing she awoke.


She lay for a few moments, wondering

whether she was really awake or still dreaming, for the same monotonous noise went on. She was now certain it was what she had heard in the dressing-room, although she had failed to find any cause for it there. Her first thought was, she was sure she had closed both doors—how then could she hear the sounds, in all their dull monotony, nearer and clearer than ever? In a moment Gwen was sitting up in bed, rubbing her eyes, to make sure she was quite awake. No doubt about that. The fire had sunk very low, and the two tall candles she had left on her toilet-table were burning still. The room was too large to be fully lighted by them, and they only seemed to show the table and large mirror just as she had left them, with a few books and articles of dress scattered on the nearest chairs and tables.

Gwendoline was now quite certain that she was fully awake, and that her ears no more deceived her than her eyes. She listened more attentively, and became convinced, with a shudder of fear, that the low chanting, proceeding from some person or thing, was close to the bedside—even on the other side of the curtain, which was half drawn. On, on it went—there was no pause, no break in its monotonous note.

Then Gwendoline said, trying to re-assure herself, “No one with evil intentions would proclaim his presence so persistently. I must clear up the mystery, and see what it is—anything is better than this horrid state of suspense.”

That side of the room from whence the strange noise proceeded was darker and farther removed from the light of the can-



dles than the other part. But when Gwendoline, with a courage and a spirit inherited from her Welsh ancestors, suddenly drew back the curtain, the light was also admitted, and enabled her clearly to discern a sight that was as unexpected as it was startling.

CHAPTER X.

ON a chair close to the head of the bed sat what appeared to be the figure of a very old woman—so old that the face which was turned towards Gwendoline was more like that of a corpse than of any living creature. The dress, too, far more resembled grave-clothes than ordinary habiliments. The serge-like drapery was drawn closely round the skinny throat, and there it was met by a sort of tight-fitting white cap or coif, which left the meagre outline of the face fully displayed. The head was turned in the direction of the bed, and as Gwendoline gazed eagerly out on this un-

pleasant apparition, a pair of colourless, stony eyes met hers. All was silent then. No sound came from those rigid lips, and the whole figure might have been carved in stone, so still and motionless did it remain under Gwendoline's scrutiny. Her own eyes wandered searchingly over this strange object, and as she looked she observed that the almost fleshless hands and arms, from which the serge sleeves fell back loose and wide, were raised, and clasped round a sort of bundle, holding it like an infant, which in shape and size it resembled.

As Gwendoline continued to gaze, a sort of dim recollection came over her of having in her childhood seen something like the face and figure before her. The silence became intolerable, and yet the poor girl could not withdraw her eyes from those of the unwelcome visitor. At length Gwendo-

line forced herself to say, in faltering accents,

“You must be old Mona?”

The death-like head slowly bowed to this interrogatory; and then Gwendoline taxed her memory to recall the facts connected with the old woman of her early recollections. She knew that she was very old—past a hundred, at least—that she had been in her younger days a nurse in her mother’s family; but after she became aged and unfit for service, that she had been pensioned off. She believed she was considered odd—of late years she had never seen her, but she knew her mother occasionally visited her. She had her own house, a mile or two away from the Castle, and how she came or what she could do there that night, passed Gwendoline’s power of imagination. Still, having ascertained her identity, she asked,

"What brings you here, Mona? You ought to be in bed and asleep at this time of night."

The skinny lips relaxed, and the words "so cold," in Welsh, proceeded from them. Gwendoline knew enough of her native tongue to interpret the words, and she replied,

"Yes, I am sure you must be cold. Pray go back to your bed. Are you sleeping in the Castle to-night, and where?"

"Nowhere," replied the figure, like an automaton.

"Well, do go away now and find a bed. What have you got there that you are holding so close?"

"My baby."

"Well, take it with you, Mona, there is a good soul, and go away."


"I cannot."

"Why, you don't mean to stay here all the night, I hope?" said Gwendoline, alarmed at the prospect of passing the night under the surveillance of those stony eyes.

"Baby's cold," replied the ancient dame.

"Of course it is," said poor Gwendoline, humouring the idea, and continuing, "So the quicker you take it away with you into a warm bed the better. Where is your room?"

"In the grave," was the chilling answer to this query, and it imparted some of its uncomfortable associations to Gwendoline's own feelings. Still (little as people might have thought it) Gwendoline had a brave little heart in her slight, delicate frame, especially when the good of others was concerned; so she began to pity the poor, desolate old creature, as she sat there in the cold and darkness, fancying she was



still engaged in nursing some baby of that ancient house ; so she said kindly,

“ If you choose to remain here, I will take off a blanket and wrap you and baby up in it. Do you think you will be comfortable then ? ”

“ Never on earth. ”

“ What do you want, then ? ” asked Gwendoline of her unearthly-looking visitant.

“ To lie down here, ” and the stony eyes turned from Gwendoline to the bed on which she lay, and the skinny hand was withdrawn from her supposed nursling, and laid on the coverlet.

Gwendoline's heart failed at the prospect of such a bed-fellow, and she was half-inclined to rouse the house, and get some one to deliver her from such an incubus ; but the aged creature appeared to look longingly on the couch before her, and even

to assume something of supplication in her mien, as she almost urged—"It was here my own lady died." That lady must have been Gwendoline's great-grandmother; and she recalled something of the legend of her early death when her grandfather was born, and supposed it might have been in that very room, according to old Mona's remembrance.

So Gwendoline, after a short but desperate struggle betwixt her kindness and her cowardice, suffered the first to prevail, and said, "Come, then!" and then retreated to the very farthest corner of the bed, which was very large and wide, and lay there shivering from a strange mixture of sensations. She soon felt, or fancied, that her ancient guest had availed herself of her extorted permission to get into the bed; and then Gwendoline trembled violently, and


became quite unconscious for a considerable time.

At length the long, long weary night came to an end, and Gwendoline awoke from her sleep or trance to find broad daylight was streaming into the room, the shutters were opened, and the housemaid lighting the fire. What a blessed return to light and life it seemed! Gwendoline roused herself, and looked round hastily to see how the wretched old woman had passed the night. But there was no trace remaining of old Mona—the bedclothes lay still almost undisturbed, except being slightly turned back, where Gwendoline supposed she must have got in! But was it all a dream?

Gwendoline's heavy eyes and haggard countenance, when she appeared at breakfast the next morning, was sufficiently accounted

for when she related how her night had been passed. Mr. Lloyd, the agent, a gentlemanlike, elderly man, happened to be present, having come up early, and had joined the family party at breakfast. It was a relief to Gwendoline's mind that Mr. Lloyd seemed to know all about the old woman who had so disturbed her rest the previous night.

"Yes," said he, "old Mona Price (I believe she was christened 'Monimia') is a very well-known character about here. She must be considerably upwards of a hundred years old—nearer one hundred and eight, I should think. No, Miss Powys, you were not likely to have seen much of her, as she became very eccentric during your father and mother's life-time, and was not a desirable inmate in any well-ordered house. Still she retained very strong instincts of



family attachment, and her remembrances of her first lady, your great-grandmother, the Lady Gwendoline Powys, seemed to increase as every other recollection decayed and wore away. They were both young together, for she was brought up in the Earl of Dartmore's family, and came here with her lady when she married, and was inconsolable at her early death, when your grandfather was born."

"Ah!" said Gwendoline, "that accounts for her strange delusions last night, and fancying she had a child with her."

"I wonder you did not die of fright when she stepped into the bed!" said Maude.

"Well, I believe I very nearly did, for I have no clear recollection of anything that happened after that, till I awoke, too happy to see daylight at last, and also to perceive

my strange visitor was departed. But do tell us, Mr. Lloyd," continued Gwendoline, turning to the agent, "how she happened to be here last night, and to find her way to my room?"

"That is more than I can account for, Miss Powys; all I know is, her home has, for the last two years, been at her granddaughter's, who is married to the undergardener, and has a cottage in the grounds. I was told she was much excited at hearing of all that was going on on the occasion of your return yesterday evening; but I never heard of her leaving the house, or having been up here on the occasion."

"She fancied she was nursing a baby," said Gwendoline.

"Yes, that has been poor old Mona's pet delusion for some time past, and no doubt has made her happy; but it is a perfect

mystery to me how she could have come here and returned there, unperceived by anyone."

"Except by me, unluckily," returned Gwendoline, with a smile.

Just then the old housekeeper, who was a sort of privileged person, tapped at the door; and being bid to enter, came in with a deprecating look, saying,

"I thought I had better come and tell you the news I have just heard."

"Yes, yes, pray come in, Mrs. Jones," was the cry of the three young people, who had been petted and spoilt by her in their various degrees nearly as long as they could remember, and who appreciated her accordingly. "Yes, we all like hearing news, Jones," said Gwendoline, who was her especial favourite and mistress at the same time, adding, "And when you have told

your story you shall hear mine, which I am pretty sure is nearly as wonderful."

Gwendoline had not mentioned her night's adventure, except as related at the breakfast-table.

"Oh! well, my dear Miss Powys, I don't say I have anything so very remarkable to say; it is only that Jessie Williams has just been up to say that her grandmother, old Mona Price, was found dead in her bed this morning when she went to see after her. Nothing very surprising, you see, my dear ladies, considering the old lady's age, which is the most extraordinary part of it—a hundred and nine years old! Well, poor old lady, she's gone to her rest at last. She often complained that death had forgotten her, and that she longed for the grave, but wanted to see a Powys back again in the old Castle; so last night she had her wish—and went to rest upon it!"

Gwendoline turned white, and her cousins and Mr. Lloyd looked at each other in speechless astonishment, whilst the old housekeeper eyed the group in silence, and wondered what was the matter. At last Gwendoline faltered out,


“But, Jones, she—the old woman—was up here last night. I have just been telling them all about her coming and sitting by my bed. And oh! Jones, she would come into it!”

“Oh! don’t say that, my darling young lady!—never tell me such an awful tale as that! What! a corpse came up in the night and slept by you! No, no; never while my name is Betty Jones will I believe that. Why, the poor old woman has been bed-ridden this last year.”

“I did not know that, Mrs. Jones,” said the agent, looking rather surprised.

“Mostly so, sir,” said Mrs. Jones; “and for the most part kept her bed, though you might have seen her up the last time you paid her the pension money, for she was jealous of anyone receiving it except herself. She was foolish enough about some things, and sensible in others. One of her great crazes was in her silly fits that she was nursing a baby, like as she did years and years ago; and then she would get up a great bundle of things and dress it, and fashion it like an infant, and drone to it, and seem to fancy she was acting nurse again. Poor old soul! she has had a long, weariful lease of life, and no one can be sorry she is gone home at last.”

“But how did she get to my room, and back again to die in her own bed, and no one know anything of it?” persisted Gwen-doline.



“Well, my dear Miss Powys, you must have dreamt it; or”—and here the good woman’s voice was reverently dropped—“or *He* may have permitted her spirit, as it was departing, just to see what it longed so for on earth; though I don’t much like to think of poor Mona having been so near you, my darling young lady. But that room, you know, was the Lady Gwendoline’s, and she died in it, poor young soul; but her boy lived to become your grandfather, and Mona Price was his nurse—he never had any other; and a beautiful boy he was, they say.”

“You must give me another room, Jones,” said Gwendoline, abruptly; “I can’t sleep there again. If, as you seem to think, it was old Mona’s spirit, I should be afraid of seeing it again there.” And Gwendoline looked pale and very much as if she had seen a ghost.

Mrs. Jones would have thought it very awful had the veritable woman in truth appeared in Miss Powys's room and ended her days there; but the Welshwoman did not, on consideration, think it at all impossible that the released spirit might have been permitted to have a parting glimpse of the last of the race she had served so long.

There was a great division of opinion on the subject. Gwendoline's cousins were quite decided on the opinion that the old woman, with that supernatural strength which sometimes returns shortly before death, had managed, in all the bustle of the preceding evening, to leave her room and the house unseen by any of her relations, and had then concealed herself in the dressing-room adjoining the apartment which was most endeared to her by early associations. They

assured Gwendoline that she could never actually have got into the bed, as its undisturbed state seemed to testify, but had managed to crawl away and regain her own home, which was not far distant; but the exertion had been too much, and her death was the immediate result.

On the other hand, both the old woman's relations and the housekeeper adopted the spirit theory. Her grand-daughter declaring it was an utter impossibility for her grandmother to have got away, and returned, and laid herself again in her bed, where they found her the following morning quite dead; they declared there must have been some evidence of such an extraordinary proceeding, but after the most searching investigation nothing appeared to favour that idea.

Mr. Lloyd was very cautious of express-

ing his opinion on the vexed subject, which flew quickly from mouth to mouth through the whole parish, where the supernatural history universally gained ground.

“And what do you think, father, about old Mona and Miss Powys?” asked Miss Margaret Lloyd, the agent’s only daughter, who had presided over her father’s widowed household for the last twenty years, and was generally known to have very decided opinions of her own.

“Well, my dear,” said the agent, rather wearily, for he had been on foot the greater part of the day, and though a hale old man, was not sorry to rest in his own arm-chair, and put on his slippers, and take off his best coat when he did so, “my head is quite confused with all I have been hearing on the subject to-day. The old woman seems to have made more talk about her on

the day of her death than she has done in all the course of her life."

"But that is no answer, father. *Did* Miss Powys see a ghost—the ghost of old Mona—last night?—or did she see the living woman?"

"That is a very near question, my dear, and must take a wiser head than mine to decide. I can settle accounts for the living, but when you come to ghosts I am fairly at fault. But what do *you* think about it, Margaret? You have had all the *pros* and *cons* laid before you, I guess, pretty often to-day, and you are not a bad judge in general."

"Oh! I don't reckon anything at all of all the foolish things I hear said on the subject, father; but I have my own opinion, and that is, that the poor young lady was visited by a dying woman's spirit, just as it passed away. And it is a sign——"

"Sign of what?" asked Mr. Lloyd, as he stirred the glass of negus that his daughter dutifully and dexterously prepared for him.

"Well, I always think, father, that people who see spirits, and as clearly as this was seen, are not long for this world; and then, appearing, as it did, the very night of her arrival at her own old ancestral home—and then the death that same night, seems all to portend trouble to that house; it may be to herself, or others connected with her."

"I am sorry you think so, Marget," returned her father, solemnly; "but we may hope better things. She is as nice and pretty a young lady as can be seen in the whole principality, and as gentle and sweet as her mother was before her, and that is saying something. Well, I only hope her cousin is worthy of her. We have not known so much of him of late years; but I

suppose there is no doubt of their fulfilling her parent's wishes—they were pretty well known, and I daresay, when Miss Powys comes of age—as she is to do at nineteen—next month, we shall hear something more on the subject.”

Miss Lloyd looked steadfastly into the fire, then at the ceiling, and finally turned her attention to her work, saying, as she settled to it with her usual energy,

“I never like to hear of those family-planned matches for young people—it seems to take all the freshness out of their first love, and often makes them go the very contrary way to what they were intended.”

“Ah! but I don't think you need have any fear in this case—at least, if you can judge by what you see in a young girl's eyes; and I am sure her cousin, Mr. Beau-

mont, is first in this world to her—yes, above everyone else.”

“And what do his eyes say?” asked Miss Lloyd.

“Oh! I never looked there—he must be only too fond and proud of her.”



CHAPTER XI.

GWENDOLINE'S own opinion on the subject of old Mona's appearance was never decidedly ascertained, as she declined talking about it, and said as little as possible when the topic was introduced. Her cousins also avoided it, and seemed to consider they had settled the matter, and that there was no further question about it. Gwendoline changed her room that night, and chose one very close to Maude's—rather a small and insignificant apartment for the lady of the Castle.

“I have always slept in a little room here, Maude, and I like it best,” said she,

stopping all remonstrance on the subject, and leaving her maid Marion to decide as to where she should bestow the extensive wardrobe of her lady, there being, she considered, very deficient accommodation in her new apartment.

Maude, whose nerves were of the strongest, and whose imagination never strayed beyond the bounds of possibility or probability, was inclined to laugh at Gwendoline in her new arrangements; but seeing she suddenly turned very pale and remained silent, Maude forbore any further allusions to the eventful night of her arrival, though she told Louis she was sure Gwendoline looked upon her as a ghost non-conductor, and so was disposed to place herself under her protection.

“I thought the question had been satisfactorily settled, even to Gwen’s sensitive

imagination," returned her brother; "but you must remember now, Maude, that we are guests—privileged ones, no doubt—in Gwen's house, and we have no right to interfere in any of her arrangements, or to question the propriety of her changing her room every night, if it pleases her to do so."


Maude was struck by something new and rather strange in her brother's mode of speaking of their cousin—it seemed something like a severing of interests and pursuits, that had hitherto been so closely twined together. Maude looked eagerly in her brother's face, as if seeking for some explanation there (for she had always indulged in the belief of the ultimate union of Gwendoline and Louis), and now experienced something of a blank, uncomfortable feeling stealing over her. As Louis

said no more, but continued looking absently out of the window, Maude came and stood by him, and said,

“I can’t help feeling Gwen’s house is our home, as much as ours is hers, Louis.”

“Well, my dear, I hope we have none of us hitherto disagreed on that subject; but a time must come when we must all go different ways, and have our own individual interests to attend to—and separate homes, of course.” Then, observing Maude’s look of painful inquiry as to his meaning, he smiled, and turning the subject a little, said, “Why, Maude, are not you at this very moment thinking of a step that will take you both from Gwendoline’s home, and mine too, and give you a different and separate one of your own? Come, be candid. I see I am right.”

There was no doubt Louis Beaumont had touched a chord which vibrated strongly,



for Maude first blushed a deep rose colour, then suddenly turned very white.

"I beg your pardon, dear, I had no intention to distress you, but every one must see the encouragement you have been giving."

Here the brother stopped, and the sister, as if collecting all her determination, looked him steadily in the face, and said "*Who?*"

Louis laughed.

"Well, I should have thought there was no occasion to ask that question; and furthermore, if it is any satisfaction to you, I can only say you will have my full consent to accept Sir Digby Ferrers, as soon as it pleases you."

Maude drew a deep sigh, as of relief, but only said, "Thanks very much," in an indifferent tone, and appeared inclined to drop the subject. Louis, however, seemed sud-

denly struck by something in his sister's look and manner, and cast a quick, searching glance over her face, and then said,

"Surely I have made no mistake, Maude?"


Miss Beaumont turned away in some confusion from her brother's penetrating gaze, and answered hurriedly,

"I am hardly prepared to answer that question yet, Louis, and I do not see why you should have put it. I do wish you and everybody would leave me a little longer to the enjoyment of my liberty," she concluded, impatiently.

Louis answered, rather coldly,

"You are perfectly at liberty to please yourself, Maude ; but surely, if you encourage a man in that way, he and everyone may suppose you mean something by it."

"I mean no more than you do, Louis.



Why, I am sure *you* flirt at times with people you never dream of marrying."

"Leave me out of the question, please, Maude, and my affairs also. I can settle them without any interference."

"And so can I," retorted Maude, beginning to feel displeased with her brother; adding, "I have as much right to draw inference in regard to you as you in regard to me."

"Hardly, I think; for whilst you are under my protection, I must see to, and be in some degree answerable for, your conduct. Surely," he said, as if a sudden thought had struck him, "you are not encouraging two men at once, for your amusement?"

"I shall amuse myself as I please," answered the sister, somewhat defiantly.

"Then the result will be, you will pos-

sibly be the sufferer," answered Louis, with that blindness and want of appreciation of his sister's power of fascination that is often, curiously enough, to be found in brothers.

"Very well—leave me to suffer, then," retorted Maude, by no means in an amiable mood.


"In being deserted by Sir Digby, and—and——" returned Louis, pausing.

"Pray finish your sentence, as I am unable to do so," said Maude.

Then Louis, relenting, and seeing her annoyance, replied, in a conciliatory tone,

"Come, Maude, don't be angry. I never wish to quarrel with you, but I do think you are playing a foolish part. Of course you know I allude to Mr. Penrose—and you can't have both the gentlemen."

"I should think not, even if I wished it," returned Maude, with supreme disdain, and



not without a little feeling of retaliation as she added, "especially seeing that the last gentleman you named is engaged to Miss Maxwell."

It was then Mr. Beaumont's turn to change countenance, and look even more deeply annoyed than his sister had done, and he said hurriedly,

"Are you saying what you believe to be true, Maude? And from whom did you hear this precious piece of gossip?"

"From Mr. Penrose himself, and I believe it to be true."

Louis passed his hand over his brow, as if collecting his thoughts, and then he asked, "Will you tell me all he said to you?—that is, if it does not pain you."

Maude looked up proudly.

"Why should you think it pains me? On the contrary, I think it is a very proper


and becoming match for Mr. Penrose and his connection, Miss Maxwell. I can hardly tell you the exact words he used on the occasion, for it was more by implication that he let me know it ; but when I said it was very suitable and natural, or something to that effect, he took it as I intended ; and so he did subsequently, when he spoke of his anxiety on Miss Maxwell's account when she was ill."

"Has she been ill ?"

"Nothing serious, I suppose, or he would not have been so cool about it ; but I have no more doubt of their engagement, Louis, than I have that you and I are sitting in this room in Rhys Castle."

"How long do you suppose that this engagement has subsisted ?"

"I cannot possibly tell ; but I am inclined to think not long. My own idea is that



they have been thrown together a great deal since that fire—he said he had been constantly at Miss Maxwell's house—and so they have naturally drifted into this engagement."

"Drifted into an engagement!" repeated her brother, indignantly—"how can you talk so, Maude! I am half inclined to think you are mistaken still, Maude!"

"I cannot think so," replied the sister, in a tone of quiet conviction that struck with deadly force on her brother's heart; but Maude looked so unsympathetic that Mr. Beaumont did not feel much inclined to open his heart, and confess to her then and there. After a brief pause, Maude said, "But let the case of their engagement be as it may, I do not think *we* need dispute over it. It can have no particular interest to either of us."

Though this was said as if conclusively, there was still a slight tone of inquiry in her voice ; but her brother chose to disregard it, and merely said,

“ I am glad that you, on your part, are able to say as much.”

Maude, at first, made only an impatient gesture ; then, after a minute, her natural cheerfulness seemed to return, as well as love for her brother ; and, as if dismissing the subject that had disunited them, she observed,

“ This is bad weather for gaiety, and the few neighbours we can boast of here are away ; but don't you think we ought to get up something lively, on account of Gwen's coming of age ?”

“ You and she are the best judges of that,” replied her brother, who had not followed his sister's example in brightening

up after their little skirmish, but still stood looking moodily from the window.

Then Maude stole gently up to him, and laid her soft round cheek against his shoulder caressingly, and said,

“Dear Louis, forgive me if I was cross; I really won’t be so again any more—till the next time.”

Louis laughed faintly, and took the *amende* as intended; but his brow did not clear, neither did he make any further observation on Maude’s suggestion, so she continued,

“Come, Louis, let us think a little about poor dear Gwen and her birthday. We must celebrate it in some way or other—the people here will expect it.”

“Well, you can consult Mr. Lloyd, who is the best person on such an occasion; but it will be very difficult to collect a large

party down here for any purpose of gaiety—but you and Gwen can do, of course, whatever you wish. It will be my last act and deed of guardianship, and I should be sorry not to carry out any wishes of yours or hers, so you must ascertain her inclinations on the subject.”

“Oh! Louis, you must know dear Gwen would never desire anything done in her own honour; and whatever you or I might settle for her, she would prefer to anything else.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Beaumont, with a weary sigh, “you can write and ask, and settle anything that Gwen likes, and if you tell me whom you wish me to ask, I can do it. I suppose Sir Digby may figure at the head of the list?”

“No,” replied Maude, quickly—“not at all; don’t let us ask him down here. You

are acting for Gwen till she is of age, and if you say 'Come' all this distance, what would *he* say?"

"What I suppose he has said a great many times before, Maude, and what he would not say unless you had encouraged him to do so."

Maude paused for a moment; then she recovered her good temper with the determination not to quarrel again with her brother; and then she said,

"We need not discuss that part of the subject till Gwen has been consulted; but it is only right that you should end your guardianship with some entertainment to the tenants and people about, and, of course, all the poor people ought to be feasted—they will expect it."

"I suppose they will," replied Louis, drearily; adding, "But Mr. Lloyd, who


knows all, and every person and thing about here so much better than I do, ought to settle and arrange everything. It is really a great comfort and relief to my mind that Gwen will have such a person to look after her property and apply to when I resign office."

"You need never resign—as you call it, Louis," said his sister, with a meaning in her tone that was not difficult to interpret; but she dared not speak more openly, and yet felt impelled to venture on the subject.

Louis coloured slightly as he replied,

"People should never be so ready to answer for others, Maude—especially you, who never know your own mind for two days together."

"Well, perhaps I am a wee bit *inconsequente*, as the French call it; but Gwen is not—she is much better than I am. I don't



mean it in humility, for I am not humble, and I like myself very much, and like others to like me—that is, people who are worth caring about; but really Gwen is a darling, and I have never known her but in one mind all my life. I am sure no one can ever say Gwen flirts.”

“Indeed no; I never saw her do so,” returned Louis.

“Then if she seems to like a person, that person may never fear any change in her.”

“Are you saying that, Maude, in reference to myself and Gwen?”

“You must know best, Louis.”


“I conclude you are, and as I do not like what is called beating about the bush, I answer openly. I love Gwen as—a sister, and the love, I hope, she has for me is as for a brother.”

“Brother and sister!” retorted Maude, in high disdain. “As if those relations can ever be entertained by any except those whom natural ties have so united! It is all very well to talk so now, Louis, but you did not feel so always.”

Mr. Beaumont quailed for a moment beneath his sister’s flashing eyes, and then answered,

“I have never said anything to you or her to make either of you suppose so.”

“I do not know what you have said, Louis, but I know there was a time when Gwen seemed everything to you—when you delighted to look on her and her interests as the most precious trust our dear uncle and aunt bequeathed to you. In those days you never talked of separate homes and separate interests as you do now, and seem to think it almost a trouble to have any-



thing to do with poor Gwen's affairs, and as if you would be glad when the day comes that you are able to 'resign office.'"

And then Maude's generous passion became quenched in tears, the more noticeable as she was seldom known to cry. Louis looked as if he would have been very angry but for those tears; so he only said, half kindly, half contemptuously,

"You are really quite unlike yourself to-day—so irritable on every subject; neither do I think Gwen would thank you for your championship."

"Poor dear Gwen!" said Maude, drying her eyes. "Perhaps not; but if you desert her, am I to do so too, and see her heart broken, for want of a few simple words?"


"Hush, hush, Maude! do not talk of broken hearts; I did not think you were so young-ladyish. I am sure no man or woman either believes in them."

"Very well, Louis. I will only say that if you are in earnest, and do not care for Gwen, 'except as a sister,' you have done her grievous wrong; and everyone will think so too, and so I warn you."

"I hope I shall find some sensible people left in the world, even after Maude Beaumont seems to have taken leave of her senses for the nonce. But it is nonsense sparring in this way, Maude. It can do no good to Gwen, who would, I daresay, object to being discussed in this way. Indeed it is hardly fair or womanly in you to do so, Maude."

The tears dried themselves in the hot blush that this remark called up on Maude's cheek, but she answered, as defiantly as ever,

"I am ashamed of you, Louis, and I am sure I never thought to be so before. But



you can talk of being womanly! I ask you if it is manly to turn round on me so, because of what I say to you about Gwen? Oh! Louis, do remember how alone we three are in the world—you and I and Gwen; and though both you and she are so rich and prosperous, yet I know in her heart how little she values it all, and would part with everything she has to-morrow to make you or me happy. Poor dear Gwen! all she cares for is the love she has known all her life; and now she has lost both father and mother, she looks to us to give her ours. Yes, I know what you would say—she has yours, as a brother; but brothers and sisters part and go their several ways, and you and she ought never to part; you seemed once by your conduct to say as much, and her father and her mother trusted her to you, and hoped she

might be your wife, and that everything here might be yours and hers together."

"You are presuming on a great deal, I think, Maude," returned her brother, in a softer tone.

"It is all true, and you know it, Louis; but if neither you nor Gwen had ever fancied each other in that way, I would never have said it. But you did love her once more than a sister—I am sure you did; and I thought how kindly our dear uncle had foreseen it all, and given his consent, in case you might have felt any scruples about trying to win her. Oh! Louis, you should never forget what you owe to him—and I too! What should I, a helpless girl, have done when our own mother deserted us, and our own father was taken from us? What should we have done without him and my aunt?—and now there is their own

one darling daughter clinging to you for everything that is to make life desirable to her, and you are ready to cast her from you, and to forget the past, all—because——”

“Because what?”

“Well, I firmly believe it is because you have a fancy you love Ruth Maxwell.”

“And if I do, what is that to you?”


“Everything; for unkindly as you are now feeling, I know she is unworthy of you!”

“Who dares say that?”

“One who knows her well—Miss Wheeler. I did not believe her at first, but now I do.”

CHAPTER XII.

AT this crisis of the conversation an interruption took place. Mr. Lloyd was announced, as desiring to speak to Mr. Beaumont. It made a seasonable diversion to a discourse that was on the point of becoming too warm to be pleasant. Maude took advantage of the pause to make her escape by a further door before the agent came into the room. Maude felt very hot and uncomfortable as she left her brother. She was not in the habit of quarrelling with any one, least of all with him; but she could not feel sorry that she had at last relieved her mind of some of its fears and




fancies in regard to him and Gwendoline, which had of late been daily gaining ground, but had never assumed a definite form until her brother's words that day had suddenly given them shape and substance.

"Yes," thought she, as she pursued her way to her own room, feeling hardly able to face sweet, unconscious Gwendoline at that moment—"yes, I see it all—it came upon my mind like a flash of lightning; and Louis's countenance confirmed my own suspicions. It is true he likes or loves that girl. I never believed it before, though I was afraid he was foolishly flirting with her; but I never dreamt of anything serious! My poor darling Gwen!—well, thank Heaven! it seems she is engaged to marry that very prudent petrification, Mr. Penrose! They are well suited to each other; though I did think once he had a

soul above his Brewery. But as Miss Maxwell has a share or concern in it, no doubt he sees the expediency of their uniting their interests ; and she, according to Miss Wheeler's history, is perfectly willing to make herself agreeable to either of the gentlemen who appears to be most in earnest. I daresay she had heard of Louis being engaged to Gwen, and so mistrusted his *petits soins*. She was calculating enough not to let the substance go whilst she grasped at a shadow."

Just then Maude's meditations were interrupted by running against Mrs. Jones, as that lady emerged suddenly from Gwendoline's apartment, just before Maude reached the door of her own room. It became needful to stop and apologise on both sides.

"Dear me, ma'am, I've startled you, I fear! What a colour you have got," said the housekeeper.



“Yes, my cheeks feel very hot. I am walking in this cold passage to cool them. Is my cousin in her room, Mrs. Jones?”


“No, ma’am, she is out walking—gone to Miss Lloyd’s, or Mrs. Morgan’s (our new clergyman’s wife, you know, Miss Beaumont), so, as she is out, I came in here to see after a few little things that want doing in her new room. She seems quite settled to have that, and no other; but it is hardly fit for her, so I am going to see about putting in better furniture.”

“My cousin says she is very comfortable there; and I am close by to take care of her, you know, Mrs. Jones. She has taken quite an aversion to the large rooms and state-beds; but I rather wonder you did not get her mother’s room ready for her when she first came home. Come into my room, Mrs. Jones, it is cold standing out

here in the gallery—there, take that arm-chair by the fire—it is a treat to have a little chat with you, as in the good old days when Gwen and I used to escape from the schoolroom for that purpose.”

The good old housekeeper obeyed the invitation, and seated herself rigidly upright on the edge of the easy-chair pushed forward by Maude, then continued the conversation by saying,

“Yes, Miss Maude, there are my dear lady’s rooms, and the Colonel’s, just as they were left when they died ; and I have seen Miss Gwendoline go into them all by herself at times ; but I thought it would never do to put her there the very day she came home. She would have done nothing but cry and fret all night for her poor mamma and papa ; besides which, it would have been very lonely, and much more out of



the way than the Lady Gwendoline's room, which I fancied would be most suitable to her at present."

"It was an unlucky selection, after all, Mrs. Jones; but I hope she will get over her dread in time, and allow herself to be moved into a better room."

"Well, my dear Miss Beaumont, perhaps that will do for the present; but it is in my thoughts that when a certain happy event takes place, which we are all looking forward to, then it will be the right time to have those rooms—her mamma's and the Colonel's I mean, they are quite a suite—all new done and furnished; and we shall hear no more of frights and fears then!"

"You are alluding to my cousin's probable marriage?"

"Indeed I am," returned the old servant, nodding her head, and continuing—"And

also—if I may take the liberty of mentioning it—to your brother, Mr. Beaumont's, also. Ah, they will make a noble pair ! He is as like his uncle, the Colonel, as like can be—two handsomer men were never seen !”

Maude sighed, as she said,

“ Yes, Louis is reckoned very handsome, and so was my uncle, and dear Gwen is as pretty now as she was when a child, with the same lovely complexion and golden hair !”

“ And when is it to be, my dear lady ? Is any time fixed ? Excuse my making so bold as to ask ; but all of us down here have thought that some time next month, when she comes of age, and into full possession of all her fine property, then she will make known her choice ; and everyone is glad to think it has fallen on her cousin, for we all know he was the man her father wished to

see in his place as his daughter's husband. I can say, as one that has known and served the family all my life, there is no one I should be so proud to see and serve here as master."

"And I am sure, Jones, there is no one I should be so pleased to see at Harewood as Louis's wife as my cousin Gwendoline."

"Oh, dear! I forgot—there will be another fine place wanting their presence there, as we shall here. I suppose they will not be here above half the year at a time?"

Maude laughed.

"We are getting on at a great pace, I think, with our own plans and wishes, and I do not think, as yet, that either of them have made any for themselves. Gwen is so young——"

"Hush! here she comes. I hear her

step in the passage," said the housekeeper, rising. "Thank you, Miss Beaumont, for giving me this pleasant talk ; and now I will go downstairs again."

Just then Gwendoline came in, tapping at her cousin's door, and saying,

"I hear voices, so I daresay I may join the conference, especially as I see Jones is here."

"I am just going, my dear Miss Powys."

"What a shame, to let Maude enjoy a comfortable old-times' gossip, and then run off as soon as I appear !"

Mrs. Jones, however, said she was wanted elsewhere, and left the two cousins together.

"Well, Gwen, you have stolen a march upon me. Where have you been? I would have gone with you if I had known."

"I did not like to interrupt you, for when I asked where you were, Benson told me

you were with Louis, and I thought he might want to talk to you without me," answered Gwendoline, with a little blush.

"Well, I had a long talk with him. And whom have you been entertaining meanwhile?"

"You will laugh, Maude, but I have made my *début* at the new school, in company with Miss Lloyd, and that nice little Mrs. Morgan. She and her husband take the greatest interest in that, and everything that is good. They are quite different people from old Dr. Owen and his wife; but I suppose people think more about those things now than they used to do."

"I suppose they do," answered Maude, absently; adding, "You know my talents do not lie that way."

"Nor mine either, I fear," said Gwendoline, laughing. "You can't think how

stupid and ignorant I was about all the school performances ; but Mrs. Morgan was most encouraging, and told me what good it would do to look in, and let them see I took an interest in them all. Besides, Maude, I did not forget Mr. Penrose's parting injunction about education, and so on."

"Ah!" replied Maude, roused to sudden attention, "I remember ; but he was very disagreeable that day, so he chose to expatiate upon the blessings of education—a subject I detest, and always avoid."

"Well, then, I will say no more about it," said Gwendoline : then, after a moment's hesitation, she added—"I suppose you and Louis had some pleasanter subject of discussion?"

Maude, thus recalled to the recollection of her unpleasant interview, started and slightly shivered, as if some wounded part had

been heedlessly touched, but she answered carelessly, "I do not know whether you will consider it so, as we, amongst other things, took your birthday into consideration, and how it ought to be kept. You see, it devolves on Louis, in his position of guardian, to consider and arrange for you."

"Oh! how good of him to think of it! And do you know, Maude, since the subject has been named, I have also thought of it, and what I should like to do."

"Give a great ball, Gwen, to your friends and acquaintances. I will write the invitations for you."

"Not unless you and Louis wish it very much, Maude. I don't want a ball here on my own account, but should be very glad to have one on yours, if you liked it, Maude, and if there is anyone in particular you care to ask to it."

“No, let the ball be, Gwen; if you don’t want it, I am sure I don’t—at least, just now. But I thought it might be the right thing on such an occasion; but we should have to send half over England to get people down here, and then not rooms enough to put them all in.”

Gwendoline looked vexed for a moment as she said,

“But there was a ball here when Louis came of age, though you and I can hardly remember it, Maude.”

“Oh! yes, I do, for I am much older than you; but don’t you see how different it was?—your father and mother living here, and knowing every creature far and near; and then the neighbourhood is so altered since we were here, and you too young to have gone into society, or know anything about them all. Nevertheless, the

thing *might* be done, no doubt, if you have the least wish about it."

"No, Maude; I have told you I have not. But my idea was that all the tenants ought to be entertained, as Louis will think best, and—and, of course, the poor people and the schools; and we could have a few nice people to dinner ourselves—I mean, if Louis and you like it, Maude."

"I am sure Louis will approve of your programme, Gwen, and he will say that you are the most rational young heiress that ever came into possession of such an immense weight of responsibilities."

"You are laughing at me," said Gwendoline, good-humouredly. "But seriously I do think, Maude—and I *have* thought a little about it since we came here—that I have very serious duties to perform; only I

hope I shall never be left to myself to perform them."

"You can always have good advice, dear; there is nothing cheaper in this world, and no end of people willing to bestow it upon you."

"No doubt; but *everybody's* good advice might not suit me, so I will go with my little plans to Louis, if you think he won't be bored. You know he particularly wished me to begin to take an active part about things here, so I wish to do it, and in the best way I can."

And then Gwendoline left her cousin to her own reflections, and went down to wait till Louis should appear. She little suspected the chaos of worry and annoyance that reigned in that mind which she looked up to as so supreme in its calm goodness and intelligence, for Gwendoline certainly regarded her cousin

with all the fond idolatry of a girl's first hero-worship. She sat there, quietly expectant, with her pencil and her paper before her; thinking happily more of and for others than herself. . She had already begun, in her short experience at her own home, to find that life's great secret of happiness lies more in such a state of mind than in anything more tangible.

Louis Beaumont had received Mr. Lloyd on the occasion of that visit, which apparently broke up his conference with his sister, with feelings of secret impatience and disgust. His mind was perfectly unhinged, and he listened with a weary look of lassitude, that soon caught the agent's quick eye, and caused him to express a hope that Mr. Beaumont was not ill; and as his inquiry was slightly answered in the negative, he began secretly to fear his call was ill-

timed ; and when he recalled to his recollection that as he entered the room he had caught a glimpse of a retreating female figure, he thought he might have interrupted him in an interesting *tête-à-tête* with his cousin. Under such an impression, it is needless to say Mr. Lloyd's intended visit of business was curtailed to the smallest space that courtesy demanded ; and in less than a quarter of an hour after he had been ushered into the library, he quitted it and the house. When Mr. Lloyd reached his own home he found his daughter absent, so he had to wait for the consolation of communicating his small trouble until her return. She did not appear till late, and when her father related his unsuccessful errand to the castle, and his apprehensions of having disturbed a lovers' *tête-à-tête*, Margaret told her father he might make his mind perfectly at ease on

that head, as Miss Powys had been with her and Mrs. Morgan all the morning at the school.

“All one of your fancies, father,” said the lady. “I wonder you have not lived long enough to cease caring how people look; if you give them no reasonable cause for uncomfortable looks, never mind them—they are no concern of yours, any more than the clothes they wear, be they good or bad, becoming or unbecoming. People look all sorts of ways, from all sorts of causes—and most often from something we neither know nor suspect. No one likes to be asked why he looks odd; people are not thinking of you, and you may be sure you can’t mend the matter. Sometimes it is body and sometimes it is mind, but if you are obliged to go to them on business you ought not to mind it yourself. So, father, all I mean to say is that I am

sorry you did not talk to Mr. Beaumont upon the business you went to him about, and that you allowed his fancied queer looks to drive you away."

"Well, Margaret, I was only afraid I was in the way, so I thought the best thing was to come away."

"He would not have admitted you, father, if he had thought that."


Mr. Beaumont, however, *was* glad when Mr. Lloyd took his departure. All that Maude had said had cut deep into his very soul. He saw that she considered the engagement between Ruth Maxwell and Mr. Penrose to be a settled thing, and whilst feeling it keenly on his own account, he saw that it was not a matter of entire indifference to his sister on her own. There had been a time when he fancied she rather liked John Penrose, and more than suspected

his admiration for her. But that idea had passed away, as he saw her encouragement for Sir Digby Ferrers, and heartily wished him success. For with all his liking for the gentlemanly rich brewer of Castleford, he did not wish him to marry Maude. Nor did he think there was much chance of his doing so. He rather pitied his disappointment, and showed a generous appreciation of his companionable qualities by constantly asking him to his house.

But now he had started up in a new character, and one far more objectionable than as a brother-in-law—as the accepted lover of Ruth Maxwell. He had never dreamt of such a possibility; he had thought only of his admiring Maude too much, and all the time his serious attentions were being bestowed elsewhere. He felt inclined to curse his own dilatory blind folly in having

left Ruth without a word of explanation, for he could easily believe, if she *had* begun to care for him, that she would have felt it a duty to cease to do so when told probably he was engaged to his cousin ; and that, with such a weapon to work upon her delicate sense of right, Mr. Penrose, no doubt, pressed his own suit ; and thus, stepping in, had gained the prize.

How bitterly he blamed himself ! It was clearly his own fault ; he never for a moment gave heed to a word of calumny that Miss Wheeler might have breathed against her ; he fancied he knew Ruth too well to be so influenced. His mind was greatly troubled, too, by Maude's representations concerning her cousin, and all that he owed to her dead parents. His heart was not unmoved by those recollections, and all that Maude had urged of the many claims the poor orphan



girl (lovely heiress as she was) had upon them both. Thinking these things, he came unexpectedly upon Gwendoline, sitting calmly awaiting his appearance.

CHAPTER XIV.

G WENDOLINE was looking peaceful and lovely, sitting alone in that large room, quietly waiting for her cousin, when he came in late in the afternoon, some time after his stormy interview with his sister. He felt something of the calm that surrounded her steal over his own fevered spirit, as he saw her thus all-absorbed in her new pursuits, and only waiting to know his will and pleasure as to whether her plans should be carried into execution or not. For a short time, as he sat beside Gwendoline and listened to her gentle words, his heart seemed to forget its trouble ; but it was only for a few

minutes, for the thought of Ruth Maxwell, and all his bitter disappointment, would intrude, and then he became abstracted till some repeated inquiry, urged, perhaps, with timid persistency, brought him back into his cousin's presence.

It was a pleasant, home-like scene. The two cousins apparently united in the same pursuit, the only living figures in that spacious apartment—with the exception of a large deer-hound, a pet of Louis's, which was then slumbering on the rug close by. Twilight was gradually stealing in, but the large fire burnt cheerily and brightly on the wide hearth.

Gwendoline was sitting on a sofa in the recess formed by a large Indian folding-screen, on one side of the large fireplace, with her pencil in her hand, and her little sketches of plans for village improvements on the table

before her. Louis had placed himself beside her on the sofa, to overlook all she pointed out to him ; and he sat there absently gazing, sometimes on the bright head bent over the drawing, and then on the small fair hand that guided the pencil so cleverly. They were for the most part silent, though Louis occasionally made an observation as he cut her pencil or turned over her papers. Gwendoline was very happy, both in the present and in the future. She felt as if a life rich in every blessing was opening before her, and a spirit of thankfulness sprang up in her heart as she almost wondered at the marvellous bounty that had bestowed so much on her. How could she requite it better than in trying to make all around her partake in the fulness of some of these blessings? Her transient uneasiness in regard to Ruth Maxwell had died

away since she had left that neighbourhood, and she began to wonder at the uneasiness she had suffered just before her departure from it.

Louis never talked to her or Maude of leaving Rhys—he seemed, for the time at least, contented to be there. Oh! if she could but make his life as happy as her own! “That is,” she thought, “if—” and then her reverie was pleasantly broken into by Louis, saying, “Isn’t it getting too dark to draw, Gwen?”

She looked up and saw, what she had hardly noticed before, that the evening shades were falling very fast, and almost wondered how she could have gone on so long without making the observation before. She glanced up at an old, antique clock which stood solemnly ticking out the hours on the high-carved mantelpiece over her

head. It was too dark to see where the hands pointed, and she laughingly put aside her plans, saying,


“Well, it is getting dusk, but I do think the days are beginning to lengthen.”

“Yes, they ought to do so ; it is the first week in February now, Gwen, and your birthday is the last. Have you and Maude settled what is to be done that eventful day?”

“We have talked a little about it—but only this morning. Has she told you?”

“No, I have not seen Maude since she left me in the library this morning—we had a long talk then. By-the-way, she told me a piece of news which I was rather surprised to hear,” said Mr. Beaumont, assuming an air of indifference very foreign to his feelings.

“What was it?” asked his cousin.



"That John Penrose is engaged to be married. Did you know it?"


"Yes," answered Gwendoline, rather timidly; adding, "He told her of it, I understood, the day before we left home."

"Ah! and the lady's name, too?"

"Yes—Miss Maxwell."

There was a pause after that, Louis felt as if his gentle cousin had given him a blow, —though not an unexpected one,—and poor Gwendoline flushed uneasily, though it was too dusk to be seen that she did so. They neither of them spoke for a minute or two, and it grew still darker, the clock ticked more loudly, and Oscar on the rug seemed more restless. At length Gwen broke the silence, "I suppose Mr. Penrose has not told you yet, Louis?"


"No, he has kept the matter perfectly dark."



"I should think it was only just settled when he told Maude; and I think he had been with Miss Maxwell that very morning."

"Very likely!" was the reply, in so cold a tone that Gwendoline felt no inclination to continue the conversation—at least, on that subject.

A few minutes later the servant came in to light lamps and draw the curtains, and then Louis rose from his snug corner and left the room. Not before old Benson the butler, who had lived in the family from his boyhood, and took a lively interest in all its concerns, had observed and made his comments on the two cousins, and what he supposed to be a pleasant *tête-à-tête*. Maude did not appear till just before dinner; she felt a little awkwardness at meeting her brother after their first disagreement since the days of their childhood, and therefore




dawdled over her dressing, and at last made her appearance, just as Benson threw open the door to announce that dinner was served.

Louis had not forgotten the little unpleasantness of their last parting, but it was only evinced by a kindly inquiry as to where she had been hiding all day ; and then the brother and sister exchanged a friendly glance, which seemed to put them both on their usual footing, and all went smooth again. Maude's little outbreak had, however, done Gwendoline good service, for Louis began to take things up again, much as they were before his temporary devotion to Ruth Maxwell.


He saw all that had passed between them through the haze of distance, and though he loved her fondly still, he persisted in ignoring the fact—as, he repeated to himself, she

will soon be another man's wife! And he imagined he must have deceived himself in fancying she had ever cared for him. So the days went on in that quiet old Castle, and its fairy-like young mistress approached the day fixed for taking everything into her own hands. Louis could not fail to be sensible of his cousin's feelings in respect to himself, since the day his eyes had been opened by all that his sister had said on the subject; and whilst he dwelt upon the idea, and in his unhappy state of mind he tried to draw comfort and satisfaction from the persuasion, and feel that such regard on her part deserved some return on his. Where, indeed, could he ever find one so thoroughly loveable in every way?—and where could he seek a wife whose will would always be so subservient to his own, and who would so truly (rare merit!) “honour and obey,” as well as devotedly love him?



Now Mr. Beaumont was a man who had a very strong will of his own, as may be inferred from his conduct to his mother on her second marriage, when quite a boy. And yet, strange to say, during the time of his hopeful attachment to Ruth Maxwell, the one thing he liked to remark in her was that her opinions, too, were very decided, and that she could hold them even against his own ; and with how much life and spirit had that very circumstance invested the brief period of their mutual love and ill-fated acquaintance ! To vanquish Ruth he had to exert every intellectual power and resource ; but if he succeeded in convincing her, how gracefully she yielded ; and if, on the other hand, she appeared to have the better reason, how gently she bore her triumph, and how perfect was his sense of companionship with her !

There were no triumphs with Gwendoline, very few discussions even, for she was so ready to mould her own opinions by those of her cousin that she rarely, if ever, expressed a dissentient one. All this would Louis gratefully acknowledge, as he constantly resolved the subject in his own mind, and hesitated whether to cast the die or not. At last a little circumstance gave the casting vote. It happened that Gwendoline accidentally came upon some old papers of her late father's, in an oak carved cabinet which Mrs. Jones had moved from a room formerly occupied by him to Miss Powys's apartment. These papers were apparently of no use or moment, seeming to relate only to paid accounts, and a few memoranda in relation to them. Gwendoline wanted the room in the said cabinet, and was about to commit them to the flames, when her eye was caught by a




sealed packet amongst them, of a different stamp and size; and turning it over, she saw it was in the form of a letter, and addressed to "My nephew, Louis Beaumont, to be opened by him the day my daughter comes of age, and not before, and when he resigns his guardianship."

This letter Gwendoline carefully put aside, and the next day delivered into her cousin's hands, without the slightest suspicion as to its contents. She only observed, with a smile,

"I fear you will think there is no end of your trouble with me and my affairs."

To which Louis replied,

"I am sure your father took no end of trouble in regard to mine; and you must know, Gwen, by this time, that nothing that concerns you, your interests or pleasures, can ever be a trouble to me."



So much he said at that time, but he might have said the same to his sister, and Gwendoline thought no more of it. Then her birthday came, stealing quietly in, like all other days, for there was not much outwardly to distinguish it from all others. There was no gathering of guests in the old Castle; though the tenantry were hospitably entertained, and the school feasted satisfactorily, whilst the poor on the whole estate were also regaled in the most approved manner. All the morning Miss Powys and her cousins went amongst their various guests; but that Gwendoline was accustomed to do at other times in their own abodes, and the good wishes she received on that day were hardly less fervent than those that had been bestowed upon her on many previous occasions. There was only the addition of their village neighbours, Mr. and Mrs. Mor-

gan, and Mr. Lloyd and his daughter, to their own family party at dinner; for Gwendoline had begged it might be so, and her wishes were cheerfully complied with; Maude only observing to Gwendoline,

“We will keep all our gay doings till we go back to Harewood.”

“Oh! but I may not be with you,” answered Gwendoline, to her cousin’s surprise.

“Not return with us!—why, Gwen, what on earth can you mean?”

“Only, dear, that Louis was right in what he said to me—or rather intimated, for he would not exactly tell me I must not come back—but he was right in letting me see that my proper place is here amongst my own people. I never felt that till I came, but I understand it with all my heart now. I do not mean, Maude, dear that I am not

to come and visit you, and you me, I hope, but my home is and will be here."

"This is quite a new idea," said Maude, aghast. "But when you marry, Gwen?"

"There is no question of that at present," answered she in a low tone, as if the subject was painful; then added, with a bright smile, "You must not think that I am unhappy or disappointed, Maude. I am sure everything is for the best; and if things had turned out exactly as we thought once—well, then, everything would have been very different, and I could not have cared about my own home and people as I hope to do now."

"Nonsense, Gwen! If you are thinking of Louis, I am sure he cares more for you every day; and, you see, he has quite got over his silly flirtation with that girl."

"Never mind that, dear. Miss Maxwell

is, I believe, a very good girl, and will make Mr. Penrose, no doubt, a very good wife."

It was Maude's turn to wince then; but she turned it off, saying,

"So you are bent on living alone, Gwen, that you may act Lady Bountiful with more decided effect?"

"I hope not, Maude. I should not like to live alone; and Mrs. Nelson will stay here with me."

"Then it is *I* who will be alone!" returned Maude.

"Surely not—you have Louis," said poor Gwendoline, who seemed to think that was world and society enough for any reasonable creature. But Maude expressed her difference of opinion by observing drily,

"I do not think a brother is quite sufficient in the way of a companion at all times and seasons."

“Well, then, you must know, Maude, there are plenty of people who desire your constant companionship. What would be Sir Digby Ferrers’ delight if you would only say ‘Yes’ to him?”

“Well, I shall be driven to do that at last!” cried Maude, half in jest, and a slight bit in earnest.

Gwendoline’s nineteenth birthday had been, on the whole, a happy one to her. She had been actively employed in making others enjoy themselves, and that was one great reason why she enjoyed the day herself. But there was yet another hardly-acknowledged element of happiness—it was that her cousin Louis was at her side for the most part of the whole day—that he seemed to enter into every detail that concerned her with an interest which was as new as unexpected, for Gwendoline had been of late

schooling herself to face the fact that she was but as a sister to her dearly-loved cousin. Perhaps it was this conviction which slowly and sadly established itself in her mind that made Gwendoline so readily acquiesce in the idea of establishing herself at once in her own home, and amongst her own people.

The day drew to a close, and Gwendoline's duties and pleasures were at an end also; and after the departure of her few guests she said good night, and turned to leave the room. As she did so, the thought of her father's letter suddenly flashed across her mind, and she said to Louis, as she wished him good night,


"By-the-by, Louis, have you had time this busy day to read that letter?—poor papa's, you know, which I gave you a few days ago?"

"Yes," replied her cousin, with a slight change of countenance, "I have read it, and will tell you all about it to-morrow—you have had enough business for to-day. Good night."

And then they parted. Gwendoline fell asleep, wondering what Louis would have to tell her the next day, and dreading the arrival of the one on which he would tell her that he and Maude were about to return home, and she should be left alone, saving and excepting her good old friend, Mrs. Nelson. The next morning came at last, breakfast was over, and the party was about to separate, when Louis said,

"Now, if you are at liberty, Gwen, we will look over this letter together. There is one for you inside it."

"Oh! why did not you give it to me before?"



"Because you were not to have it before, and then only on one condition."

"Well, and what is that condition?"

Louis looked steadfastly into the sweet pure eyes that were raised to his, and something there was in that gaze which caused hers to drop quickly, whilst her heart thrilled with an indefinable sensation, half joy, half fear.

"You see what it is," said Louis, gently, and feeling, almost for the first time, how great was the gift he was seeking to obtain; and then his voice dropped, and he whispered—"That you consent to be my dear wife."

For a moment poor Gwendoline was bewildered. She turned faint and giddy, and everything became dim and indistinct around her. The one prayer—the great boon of her life—was granted in a moment, so un-

expectedly, and just when she had been so diligently tutoring herself to live without it. Louis placed her tenderly in a chair; he would not oppress her with too much solicitude, for he saw at once how deeply, how tenderly he was beloved. Gwendoline's tears began to flow; she hardly knew why, except that the happiness was so overwhelming. She only faltered out—

“What does it all mean, Louis?”

“Only, darling, that if we love each other, and you consent to be my dearly-loved wife, this letter is to be given to you, expressing your parents' consent to our union; otherwise, I was to have destroyed it. Do you understand, sweet Gwen?”

“Oh, yes!”


“And do you promise what I ask?”

Gwendoline raised her sweet, tearful eyes to her cousin's face, and then, as she met

his gaze, she again whispered "Yes,"—and so Louis Beaumont and Gwendoline Powys were betrothed.

CHAPTER XV.

MEANWHILE everything went its usual course at Castleford. The *supposed* engaged lovers were as far apart as the one being at that town and the other in Rome could make them. True, there were occasional letters. John Penrose begged Ruth to write now and then, and she, knowing she might have a good deal to communicate that would be interesting, readily consented. She had not the slightest idea that her letters would have any charm for him beyond those of a friend living in the same place, and interested in the same people as herself. Ruth's thoughts turned far oftener



and more tenderly in the direction of those friends who were then in Wales. Not a sign came from them, however, and Ruth began to wonder in herself whether it was not all a dream that told her Louis Beaumont loved her.

Still the weary Winter days went on. Ruth went diligently amongst her poor, and was constant in her visits to her aunt, who, being something of an invalid that Winter, required all the amusement that could be obtained from her friends without. Miss Wheeler, at best a silent companion, was from various causes less genial than ever, and a continued cold and oppression on the chest rendered her singing to her patroness impossible for the time being.

But perhaps of all the solitary women in that little coterie, there was no one who felt the neighbourhood so desolate as Mrs.

Maxwell. She missed hearing of her children; they seemed to be again torn from her as of old, and carried to that grim old castle in Wales. She could never expect to hear of them whilst they remained there; and after some time had elapsed, unfortunately for Ruth, she took up the idea that it was incumbent on her to write either to Miss Beaumont or her cousin, and inquire when they were likely to return. Such a proceeding was so contrary to all Mrs. Maxwell's former reticence and manner of thinking that Ruth began to feel some alarm that her step-mother's mind was not as strong as it had been in former days. The incessant harping on the same subject, and ill-concealed anxiety for tidings which appeared to Ruth so unimportant to Mrs. Maxwell, filled her mind with surprise, as well as grave concern.

How she wished that Mr. Penrose would return home, that she might have some trusty friend (as she supposed) to rely on ! But he had settled he should not return till after Easter, so it was useless to expect him before that time.

As the weeks passed slowly on, and the family at the Park did not return, certain rumours began to be heard as to the why and wherefore, but people were not quite agreed on the subject. At length it came to Ruth's turn to be enlightened. She walked up one bright March morning to The Bower, and found the lady there looking rather more excited than usual, whilst her companion, sallower, and more meagre than ever, sat by, with an expression of inward satisfaction in her sinister eyes, that savoured more of gratified spite than actual enjoyment.

“ You are both looking better, and I hope

feeling so," said Ruth, cheerily, as she saluted the two ladies.

Lady Cunliffe leant back in her chair, and regarded Ruth with an inquiring, kindly look, then shook her head.

"No, I am not at all better, my dear. I daresay my face is flushed with surprise at what I have just heard."

"I do not think you need be so much surprised," murmured Miss Wheeler. "It is only what we had reason to expect, ever since we knew the family."

Here Lady Cunliffe wheeled herself round, and abruptly confronted her companion with—

"Now, Sophy, how can you be so perverse? Why, had we not good reason to think all that was put at rest long and long ago? Now I ask you if such was not the case?"

"I daresay you considered it so, Lady Cunliffe, but I cannot say *I* ever quite agreed with you, though, of course, appearances often favoured your idea."

"Come here, my dear," said Lady Cunliffe, caressingly, to her niece, and Ruth hastened to obey, whilst she wondered what made her aunt so extra-kind to herself, and so unusually impatient with Sophy. Then, as Ruth took the place pointed out to her on the sofa, Lady Cunliffe approached the subject on her mind by asking, rather abruptly, "Do you ever hear from your friends in Wales now, my dear? I mean, of course, the Harewood Park people."

"No, we do not correspond," answered Ruth, quietly, whilst her heart sank within her, for fear of what might be coming.

Here Miss Wheeler shot one of her cunning, far-seeing glances towards Ruth,

whilst she observed, in an indifferent tone,

“I fancied, one day, when I called at your house with a message from Lady Cunliffe—you may not remember the day, but I do, for I increased my cough so much in going there, though it was in the carriage—but I fancied, when something was said about the family by Mr. Dalton, who was with Mrs. Maxwell, that she asked the direction in Wales, as she told him you would possibly want to write there.”

Ruth coloured painfully. Yes, it was all correct on Miss Wheeler's part. Her mother had made the inquiry of Mr. Dalton, but it may be supposed she had never cared to profit by the information, so Ruth replied, simply,

“Yes; but I had no occasion to do so.”

“There, that's enough of your recollections, Sophy. I fear everybody's are not

as pleasant as yours seem to be." Then, turning to Ruth, she dropped her voice, and taking hold of her hand, said, "Then, perhaps, dear, you have not heard that—that the marriage that was once talked about (though the report never seemed to have any foundation) is really settled, at last, to take place? I have only just heard it from creditable authority, and it is as well you should know it at once, my dear."

All this was said with many sympathetic squeezes of Ruth's hand from the little fat palm which lay upon it. Ruth felt herself turning cold and white. She never had much colour, but now the fresh red tint forsook her lips also, and her heart seemed to stand still. But she strove to steady herself, and her thoughts, and to receive her sentence with becoming composure. She was partly strung up to the effort by hear-

ing a faint echo of her aunt's last words from the stony lips of her companion, who whispered, "As well you should know it at once! Ah, yes!" The "ah, yes!" was substituted for "my dear," and Ruth knew they were both uttered with very different feelings, Miss Wheeler thinking only of her supposed disappointed illusions in the belief that the master of Harewood Park had regarded her with feelings of love and admiration, previous to his leaving home.

To Ruth's proud, sensitive mind that conviction was intolerably painful—almost as much so as the keen sense of bitter disappointment itself. True it was, poor Ruth did receive the unpalatable tidings with such a sensation of desolating anguish as might have satisfied Miss Wheeler that Ruth was now feeling something like herself in her past trial of blighted life and love. Ruth,

however, after a moment's struggle to gain the composure that was needful to her self-respect, said, with quivering lips and a parched tongue,

“No, I have heard nothing of the family since they went away; and though your news surprises me a little, perhaps it was what those who knew them better had reason to expect.”

Ruth gained her victory. The words were firmly pronounced, in spite of all physical difficulty in their utterance; and though she spoke slowly, she contrived to say her little sentence without breaking down. The short speech told. Lady Cunliffe breathed freer, and hoped that things had not gone so far as she fancied between Ruth and Mr. Beaumont; and, on the whole, considering all things, it might be fortunate that there was an end to the


whole affair—especially as Ruth took it so coolly. No doubt there would have been a great deal of unpleasantness had it come to a downright proposal, and she might have been blamed for not warning either party of what she knew, and of which, it was so plain, they were themselves ignorant. So the good little widow felt more comfortable that afternoon than she had done since the news reached her.

The companion was not, however, so easily deceived as Lady Cunliffe. Her experienced and watchful eye detected the quiver of anguish in the voice, and the glance of desolation—though so carefully veiled—when Ruth spoke. Yes, there was no longer any fear that Sophy Wheeler should be forced to endure the hateful spectacle of happy love before her eyes, and constantly paraded before her in the person

of her patroness's niece. She had no peculiar dislike to Ruth ; she only hated to see others in possession of all that had been so ruthlessly torn from herself, and which, from her constant brooding over it, and incessant self-contemplation, had made her life a torment to herself and useless to others. Thus, in their several ways, both Lady Cunliffe and Miss Wheeler felt more contented when Ruth rose to leave the room than she had found them on her entrance.

How she walked home that day she hardly knew. She was only conscious of a dull, heavy pain at her heart, and a sensation of almost sickening regret as she looked round on every object as she passed, and remembered how often *he* had strolled by her side, and she had lingered by the way, hoping to see him ere he actually appeared.

All that was over for ever!—her first and only love-dream was come utterly to an end, and the rest of her life must be passed solitary, unloving and unloved. Once, as she looked down the street leading to the scene of the fire, and thought of all his tenderness of voice and manner, a sudden hope leapt into her heart that the report must be false—that it was impossible and out of nature that it could be true, that Louis Beaumont could have so utterly forgotten and deserted her. Then the poor heart throbbed less painfully—the feeling as of some tight ligature across it was, for the moment, loosened, the eye brightened, and her step became more elastic, and she began to remember that her mother would be expecting and wearying for her return. Ruth then walked quickly on, but just before she reached her own gate she met Mr.



Dalton coming from it. He hastened on to meet Ruth, and, all unsuspecting, began with—

“ I have just left Mrs. Maxwell—she is better and more cheerful to-day. I have just had the pleasure of informing her that your friends at Harewood Park are coming back next month, and of course we may expect some welcome tidings respecting the happy event before then.”

Ruth understood in a moment, whilst Mr. Dalton never suspected her state of mind, or even supposed his news was news to her as to the intended marriage; and she answered quite calmly, though her mind again felt wrapped in a cloud of thick darkness,

“ Yes, I have only just heard of the intended marriage—Miss Powys’s, I mean. Do you know when it is to take place?”

“ Not exactly—very shortly, I believe.”

“And where will it be?” asked Ruth.

“Oh! I suppose Miss Powys will be married from her own home, and come here afterwards—not immediately, I am told, but before they go abroad for the Summer.”

“How terribly sure did all those details make the miserable announcement!—and Ruth, longing to hear more, yet unable to ask, stood looking helplessly up in Mr. Dalton’s face. Seeing her look of inquiry, he continued—

“I really know no details at present, but I imagine we shall hear all particulars soon, for Mr. Beaumont is expected down at the Park in a few days or a week.”

“And his sister?” Ruth ventured the inquiry.

“Oh! no, I believe she remains with the bride-elect. Mr. Beaumont himself is now in London, and I believe has been there

some little time—he comes home from thence.”

“Then you have heard from himself?”

“Only a few lines. He wishes to see me on his return.”

“Not ill?” gasped Ruth.

“He does not mention that he is. And now I will wish you good evening—it is getting rather chilly, I will not keep you standing any longer.”

And so Ruth and the doctor parted.

Mrs. Maxwell was leaning back in a deep reverie when Ruth came into the room, but roused herself on hearing her footstep near, and looked up. Ruth took off her hat and gloves slowly, and laid them on a table close to her step-mother; then she raised her hand to unclasp her cloak, but she still trembled so much that it was a more difficult task than usual. Mrs. Maxwell then

looked up at Ruth, for it was contrary to her orderly habits to take off her walking things in the sitting-room; but when she had looked at her for a moment, she exclaimed,

“My dear child, you are ill! Let me help you with that cloak—it is too heavy for you—you are over-tired.”

“I shall be better presently,” said Ruth, as she sat down, quite unable to go any further at that time.

“Something has happened, I am sure, Ruth! Tell me at once what it is! Have you had any fright, or has any accident happened to hurt anyone we know?”

“No—neither, mother. Nothing whatever has happened to hurt anyone we know.”

Mrs. Maxwell gave a sigh of relief—her thoughts were always running on her absent

children, and she often mixed up Ruth with them, for she loved Ruth very tenderly. Then she observed, as Ruth sat down silent, and apparently very weary,

“I see you have been walking too far, my dear child. You must think of yourself as well as of others. Mr. Dalton is just gone away.”

“Yes, I met him at the door.”

“Did he tell you any news?”

“Yes; but I had heard it before. You mean, I suppose, the intended marriage of the two cousins?”

Ruth mentioned no names; but the two women had but one idea in their thoughts at that moment, though each little imagined the deep absorbing interest that was felt by the other. The mother was the first who spoke.

"It will be a happy union, I hope," she said dreamily.

"I cannot tell," Ruth answered, but in a tone so hopeless, so utterly miserable, that when her step-mother looked towards her, and saw the girl's face, and coupled it in a minute with the despairing tone, a sudden light flashed through the elder woman's mind, and the whole truth of the case seemed in a moment to be revealed. Mrs. Maxwell went up to the chair where Ruth rested with closed eyes and wan wretched countenance, then kneeling down by her side she whispered,

"I see it all now, Ruth, and I might have known it before—you love Louis Beaumont!"

Ruth started and looked at her step-mother like some poor dumb animal mortally wounded; but she could not speak.

She was too true in every word and thought to deny the accusation (for such it seemed to her), and yet the torture of hearing it proclaimed was intolerable. But she met so tender, so pitying a look in her mother's kind, sympathising eyes, that her own gradually softened under their compassionate gaze, and at last tears began to steal from them, and, after a fruitless effort to restrain them, Ruth laid her head on that supporting shoulder and cried passionately for a time.


That burst of weeping eased and calmed the trouble for awhile; and then came the shame to quench the tears, the shame of having so betrayed her feelings. Never, however, had Ruth known her step-mother so tender, so caressing towards her. She saw even with astonishment that tears were in her eyes also; and then the poor girl

stammered an apology, as best she might.

"I am very foolish, dear mother, to vex you so ; but I will do better soon. It took me by surprise, for he made me think he cared for me. And now it is all over, I will try to forget I ever thought it. Oh ! mother, don't despise me for—for——"

"Loving Louis Beaumont," said Mrs. Maxwell. "Oh ! no, my dear child ! How can I ? I love him myself—dearly, inexpressibly."

It was Ruth's turn then to look in wonder at her step-mother, and even with fear and trembling to doubt her perfect sanity as she made this confession. But the long pent-up secret had escaped ; it was drawn out irresistibly by Ruth's own half-acknowledgment and her too evident wretchedness. For a moment, however, every feeling seemed to be swallowed up in intense astonishment



as Ruth, looking half bewildered, said,

“Oh! mother, but that is impossible on your part.”

And she answered softly,

“But, Ruth—I am his mother!”

CHAPTER XVI. . .

“**A**ND you never told me all this long time, mother,” said Ruth, half reproachfully, half tenderly, as Mrs. Maxwell briefly sketched the history of her early married life, and for the first time revealed to her step-daughter all the trouble and sorrow that had so clouded the happiness of her second. For once in her life Ruth’s thought was of herself, and the position in which she had been placed by this unfortunate concealment of facts. “Oh! mother, if all had been open as it ought to have been, he would never have sought my acquaintance, and this could never have happened!”

"Forgive me, my child. I fear I have been to blame; but your dearest father never cared to hear the subject mentioned, so by mutual consent the past was ignored, and you were kept in ignorance. I never thought of entailing any suffering on you by doing so. I hoped to have borne my own burden to the grave."

"Ah! mother dear, it might have been lighter if you could have shared it with me."

"I don't see that, dear; but you know now why I so strongly objected to coming here with you."

"If I had but known!" said Ruth.

"If you had," replied her step-mother, "you could only have done as you have. And, Ruth, if Louis had but loved you as he ought, it might have brought everything right at last."

"Oh! no, mother," she answered, quickly,

with that delicate sense of right that was an instinct in her nature, "that could not have been; he would never have loved me, or seemed to have done so. Had he known I was the 'doctor's daughter,' and if I had known all, you cannot think I should have indulged the dream I did once. Why he has changed I know not; but it is a change, and now you tell me all, I think it just possible he may have heard something as to my family history."

"Do you think so, Ruth—do you think so?" said Mrs. Maxwell, trembling with emotion at the thought of what might be the result of that knowledge; then her heart sinking, as she remembered that, if her children did know she was their mother, nothing good had come of it, and poor Ruth had been made very miserable.

There was great comfort, however, to

both in the perfect confidence now established between the two. Mrs. Maxwell thought and talked and speculated about her children and their future, and Ruth listened with a heavy aching heart, for everything seemed to throw her at a greater distance from the man she had so loved and trusted. There were very contending feelings at work in that poor tried heart, for she knew she ought, as her beloved father's daughter, only to feel proud and angry at all the slight and contempt that had been heaped upon her from the Beaumont family ; and then she tried to think it was all for the best that his engagement was declared with his cousin, for she could no more (as she imagined) with such feelings have married Louis Beaumont than he would have cared to wed "the doctor's daughter."

The whole thing, however, was at an end

now—at least as regarded herself; and she did not think it very probable that Mrs. Maxwell's children would care to seek her at last. So no doubt it was all for the best, but Ruth cried herself to sleep that night.

A few more days passed, and Ruth had regained her usual outward composure; there had been a hard struggle, and no woman of five-and-twenty ever comes out entirely unscathed from such a bitter experience. However, Ruth crushed it all down in silence, and no one but her step-mother ever dreamt how sore a heart lay beneath that calm exterior. One thing Ruth had determined in her mind, and that was to go on exactly the same as before—to make no difference in the places she was accustomed to visit, and certainly neither to seek nor shun the Beaumont family, if chance should throw them together, though there could no longer be any

friendship between them. She therefore quietly went her rounds in the town of Castleford, and visited The Bower as often as ever. Perhaps she went there rather more frequently as the Spring advanced, for Miss Wheeler continued ailing, and her aunt became very fidgety in consequence.

One day Ruth found Lady Cunliffe in the garden superintending her Spring arrangements, in which she always took great interest. She was always glad to see Ruth, but there had been a tacit avoidance of the subject of Mr. Beaumont's and Miss Powys's expected marriage, ever since Lady Cunliffe had first enlightened her niece's mind as to the fact. On the day in question, Ruth lingered with her aunt in the garden, talking of her flowers and listening to her plans, till she remembered the existence of the companion, and inquired after her.

“Oh, Sophy’s much as usual, but she is grown so fanciful it is quite sad, poor thing ! I cannot get her to come out, or take the least interest in anything I do. I tell her, if she would but exert herself a little, it would do her all the good in the world, and so it would ; but I do not like to press her too much, for fear she should think I want her to go out on my own account.”

“I see,” said Ruth, “but I daresay she will be more inclined to move out as the Summer comes on.”

“Perhaps she may, but at present she never stirs from that arm-chair by the fire ; you will find her there if you go in.”

Ruth went in accordingly, and found Miss Wheeler sitting listlessly by the hearth wrapped in a shawl, though the morning was fine and warm for the time of year.

“I fear you are not feeling much better,”

said Ruth kindly, as she seated herself by the invalid.

"How can I be, when I cough all night, and am in pain all day?" answered Sophy, pressing her hand upon her side. Then Ruth gently murmured the usual hopeful speeches about warm weather and so on, which are generally made on such occasions. Miss Wheeler lifted her heavy eyes, and looking fixedly at Ruth, said, "I have no faith in warm weather. I begin to think I am not long for this world."

"You must not think that," answered Ruth.

"Why not? do you think that I have found this such a very pleasant world that it will break my heart to leave it?"

"I suppose we have all had or will have our share of trouble in it; but for all that there are few who do not think with regret of leaving it."

“Do you really think so?” said the companion, eagerly scanning Ruth’s countenance, and then continuing—“Now, my only regret is that I was ever born into it; and it does seem hard to have no voice or choice about it. I often think of the time when I was not, and knew nothing about it, and wish it had gone on for ever so, and there had been no unlucky Sophy Wheeler ever born!”

“You are out of spirits to-day—you should get into the air a little.”

“Nonsense, Miss Maxwell, the air will do me no good, and it gives me no pleasure. I only like to sit quiet here, and think as little as I can.”

“Lady Cunliffe is anxious about you; so, on her account, you might try what would possibly do you good.”

“Yes, I ought to remember I am a *ccm-*

panion, and try to behave myself more companionably, and die in harness at last ; but she is a kind woman, and has been good to me, whatever else she may be."

"Yes, so far you have been fortunate. You must have been happy with her."

"There is no question of happiness with me, Miss Maxwell. It is a word that has gone out of my vocabulary for many years. So the less we say about it the better."

"But," said Ruth, in a low voice, "if you have not been as happy as you wish here, you may look *forward*, you know."

"Ah ! yes, you mean when I die ; but I never look much beyond the bare cessation of existence—the stopping of this weary, painful life. I shall be quite content if all ends there."

"Oh ! don't talk so. Are there none you wish to meet in heaven ?"


"*None*," returned Miss Wheeler, with a hard, defiant look. "And if there was anyone I ever did wish or care to meet again, it would not be in heaven I should seek him."

"Oh! hush! Pray do not let us talk in this sad manner. I am sure you think—you must think differently at times. Do not you ever read?"

"Yes, I read sometimes," pointing to some French books. "But I do not read what you would call good books—they are not to my taste, so I only read such as suit me."

"Yes you may read them, but I do not think you will find much comfort from them in time of sorrow and need," said Ruth, seriously.

"Well," answered the companion, "I cannot say I have ever received what you




call 'comfort,' from any source whatever at present—neither do I expect it. My life was wrecked at the beginning, and so there is not much use in talking to me about happiness and comfort—though if you can find any in the ways you imagine, I wish you joy and all success; but what suits one person does not agree with another. So we will please say no more on this subject."

Ruth went away soon after, very full of pity for the wretched woman, who seemed so determined to have no happiness, either in this world or the next. Her mind was very full of the subject, and the prayer rose in her heart that no earthly disappointment, however severe, might make such wild havoc in her life as it had done in that of Miss Wheeler. Ruth never thought for a moment that she was intrinsically better than poor Sophy—she only prayed to be kept

from all evil. Whilst these thoughts were uppermost in her mind, as she walked slowly down the hill leading from The Bower to the town, she heard the sound of horses' feet behind her, and soon a well-known voice said,

"I am sure it is Miss Maxwell. How do you do?" And before she could look round, or answer, Louis Beaumont was at her side, leading his horse, and looking exactly the same in every way as he had done when to meet him thus was as full of pleasure as it was now of pain.

He appeared determined to see and speak to her, though Ruth stood still as soon as he joined her, and seemed to expect that, having answered all civil inquiries, he would go his way, and allow her to pursue hers. Vain hope! There was a certain restraint in Mr. Beaumont's voice and manner, and



yet, through all, an evident resolution to talk to her. Not in the same way as of old, she perceived that in a moment, but still as two friends and acquaintances might meet, after a long separation. Ruth compelled herself to say,

“ You have not been long in this part of the world, I suppose ? ”

“ No, only a few days. I hope Mrs. Maxwell is well.”

Ah ! thought Ruth. I see he knows nothing yet, or dreams that he is speaking of his own mother, or that I am the “ doctor’s daughter.” That last thought was beneficial ; it acted as a sort of tonic on Ruth’s nervous system, and enabled her (almost to her own surprise) to say calmly,


“ And Miss Beaumont, and Miss Powys— I hope are well ? - Allow me to wish you joy.”

As soon as the words were spoken, in a cold, almost haughty tone, Ruth bitterly regretted them, for Mr. Beaumont, as if catching the influence of her own tone, answered as coldly,

“My sister and Miss Powys are not here, but they are both well, thank you; and thank you also for your good wishes. Permit me to return them to yourself.”

Ruth could not understand the latter part of this speech, but she turned very white and cold, and her hands and feet became numb; she could hardly feel the ground she trod upon, and almost stumbled as she walked. Louis, who had been walking with a cold, abstracted air, was suddenly roused to look in Ruth's face, and on seeing it, his own became almost as colourless—all his reserve vanished, and exclaiming,

“Good heavens! you are ill! Lean on




me ;" and he drew her cold, trembling hand once more within his arm, as he used to do in happier days. Ruth let it rest for one moment, and then her heart seemed to beat more tranquilly, and the circulation again returned to her hands and feet.

"Thank you. I am better now, Mr. Beaumont. I have just come out of a hot room at my aunt's, and the air felt chilly."

"No, Ruth, it was not *that*," said Louis, in a calm, kind voice ; but much as he might have spoken to a dear sister, and without any of his former tender devotion of manner.

Ruth felt it all keenly, but said nothing ; it was right and proper it should be so ; and after a few moments, seeing she was really better, he let her take her hand away from his supporting arm. Then he went on again :



“I am glad to have met you, Ruth—forgive me, I ought to say Miss Maxwell—you have alluded to my approaching marriage with my cousin. Why were you vexed with me for wishing you joy also on the occasion of yours?”

“Of mine?”

“Yes, of course I refer to your engagement to Mr. Penrose, of which he himself informed my sister.”

“Miss Beaumont must indeed have greatly mistaken Mr. Penrose, for never was a report so entirely without foundation; he and I are nothing in this world to each other but good friends, such as we shall always remain, I hope. But never, never anything more.”


“And is it possible——”

But here Louis stopped and checked the wild words and wishes that would have strug-

gled to his lips, and would have told Ruth that but for that belief he would never have relinquished his hope of winning her for his own. But every feeling of manly loyalty towards his sweet cousin forbade the utterance of words which would have been so cruel to her, so treacherous to her confiding love. Ruth, however, guessed something of the warfare that was going on under cover of a manner so studiously calm; for her own soul was all in tumult, whilst both strove to preserve the appearance of tranquillity. Thus the unacknowledged desire of each to meet again was granted; but little pleasure or profit was there for either in that interview. Louis could not help feeling, as he saw and listened to Ruth once more, that she was the only one woman in the world he could ever passionately love, and did admire above all others, and would have made his wife, but

for that most unfortunate misapprehension of his sister Maude's. And whilst this conviction forced itself into his mind, he was tormented with remorse and anguish that such should be the case, and that the affection he had so carefully cherished for Gwen, ever since he had asked her to be his wife, had, as it were, evaporated, or gone to swell the tide of his deeper love for Ruth Maxwell.

She had no such regrets to torment her, and was so far free from the misery of feeling herself bound to another ; but still she remembered she was in possession of a secret that concerned him even more than herself, and would, if known to him, serve at once to separate them more effectually than any self-imposed resolutions. An irresistible longing rose in her heart to try the force of that spell, for it would at once determine their relative positions, and place



a safe barrier between them, even in imagination.

Whilst trembling and hesitating thus on the brink of this avowal, they came to the turning that led to their separate ways of road ; and then Ruth paused, cleared her throat, steadied her voice, and hardened her heart—but all the result was a faint “good evening.”

“Well, good-bye,” said Louis, who had been walking silently at her side, not daring to trust himself to speak, after he had discovered the secret of his treacherous inclinations. “Good-bye, Miss Maxwell. Perhaps we shall meet again, after—after all things are accomplished, and I shall come back to settle down quietly for the rest of my life. I may hope that you will come and see us then, and——”

“No, Mr. Beaumont, I do not think


there is much chance of my coming ever to see you and your wife ; nor do I think for one moment you would desire it, if you had any idea who I am."

"Why, are not you the same Ruth Maxwell I have known all along, and—and so—well, there is no use in recalling what I *have* thought of you ; it is vain enough now, and crime and folly to think or talk of it. But has anything (I may ask that) changed in any way with you since we last met ? "

"Nothing has really changed, only I am become aware of things I did not know before."

"And am I concerned in these things? Of course, as you speak of yourself, you are."

"Yes, we both are ; but I don't want to talk in riddles or make mysteries, and I think you ought to know the simple truth. Be assured I have only just been made ac-



quainted with it. You may find it hard to believe me, but it is so."

"Well, let me know the best or the worst, whatever it is."

"Mr. Beaumont," said Ruth, her heart beating so fast she could hardly speak, "did it ever strike you that our name was known to you in connection with those very near to you?"

Mr. Beaumont's countenance clouded over, but he said, with some effort,

"You allude, I suppose, to a certain Mr. Maxwell, a medical man, who—who, unfortunately for us, married my mother."

"Unfortunately or not for you," said Ruth, her spirit rising, and her voice becoming clear and steady, "I am proud to say I am the daughter of that medical man—the 'doctor's daughter,' if you will."

"Do you mean that you are my sister—my half-sister?"

"Oh, no; there is no relationship in the case. My mother was Lady Cunliffe's sister." Then Ruth added in explanation, "My father had been married before; he was a widower when——"

"I see," interrupted Mr. Beaumont hastily—"I see; but I was not aware—I had never heard——"

Then he stopped, and Ruth remarked, with some bitterness, "You were not likely——"

After that they both stood for a moment uneasily silent. Then Ruth, recovering her composure, forced herself to say,

"And now it only remains to say, 'Good-bye;'" and without another word she turned from him, and walked hastily away.

Thus Louis Beaumont and Ruth Maxwell parted—how and where to meet again?







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